

MUSINGS
FROM
THE
EDITOR,
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DEAR READERS

When informing authors about the theme of this first (quite belated) issue of our second volume, I felt a bit embarrassed. The topic, of course as the cover declares, is Jesus Christ and the New Evangelization. Such a theme seems almost too vast to deal with in a single issue. Isn't it the case that evangelization in its entirety is concerned with fostering an encounter with Jesus Christ? As Paul VI stated in *Evangelium Nuntiandi* nearly thirty-eight years ago: "As the kernel and center of his Good News, Christ proclaims salvation, this great gift of God which is liberation from everything that oppresses man but which is above all liberation from sin and the Evil One, in the joy of knowing God and being known by him, of seeing him, and of

being given over to him” (*EN*, §9). Christ is not simply a topic important to evangelization: he is the *raison d'être* for evangelization, the Bridegroom of a Church whose identity is “to evangelize, that is...to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ’s sacrifice of the Mass, which is the memorial of his death and glorious Resurrection” (*EN*, §14).

Of course, as I often learn with my undergraduate students, it is that which is most basic, most foundational in theology that often requires the most careful attention. Despite the fact that the God-man is at the center of the Church’s evangelizing mission, it is equally true for many of my students that “Jesus” has become akin to a ghost, a specter-like figure who once existed, has some relationship to God, and taught a number of really important moral principles (forgiving the enemy, welcoming the sinner, etc.). For such students, often uninterested in religious particularity, it might come as a shock to learn that “the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only He can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity” (*Catechesi Tradendae*, §5). The very particular signs and deeds performed by Jesus, inscribed in the faith of particular communities who wrote these Gospels, are windows into the very nature of the God who is love. By contemplating Christ through the unfolding of

the liturgical seasons, in the gradual immersion into the Christological and Marian mysteries of the rosary, in the Christo-centric stained glass windows of our parishes, we come face-to-face with the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14). And the very way we consider all of existence, all of reality, is bathed in the light of Christ. As John Donne prays, “Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord, with all these lights; that in thy light we may see light; that in this essential light, which is Christ, and in this supernatural light, which is grace, we may see all these, and all other beams of light, which may bring us to thee, and Him, and that blessed Spirit which proceeds from both. Amen” (“Christ the Light”).

For this reason, a consideration of Christ is at the heart of the New Evangelization, a spiritual renewal seeking to re-invigorate, re-imagine, re-cultivate the identity of the Church for the liberating salvation of all humanity. If the Church does not constantly return to a contemplation of her Bridegroom, of Christ, the light of the world, then she risks falling into joylessness, reducing the Gospel to a bureaucratic program sponsored by whatever ideology is acknowledged as acceptable at the time. The Church must again and again return to Christ, to gaze upon Him as fully God and fully human. For in Christ, we perceive the invisible God of total self-gift, the Son’s gift of Himself to the Father, an act of perception that re-figures what it means to think of God in the first place. As Joseph Ratzinger writes:

We do not become God by making ourselves independent or by attempting to live in the unbounded autonomy of one who is fully emancipated. Such attempts break down because of their inherent contradictions, because they are ultimately untrue. We become God by sharing in the gesture of the Son. We become God by becoming 'child', 'son'; we become God when we enter into the words that Jesus addresses to the Father and when our dialogue with the Father enters into the flesh of our daily life... (*The God of Jesus Christ*, 68).

The birth of Christ in the poverty of a stable, His hidden years in Nazareth, His proclamation of God's reign in word and deed, His revealing of a messiah-ship of self-gift on the Cross, and the Resurrection from the dead—all of these are iconic moments in which every limited idea or thought we have regarding the word "God" is rendered incomplete through the self-gift of the Son. Only through entering into the Son's relationship with the Father, becoming a child, will we truly know who God is. For such knowledge is not mere intellectual mastery but a knowledge born of love: "O immeasurably tender love! Who would not be set afire with such love? What heart could keep from

breaking? You, deep well of charity, it seems you are so madly in love with your creatures that you could not live without us!" (Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 25). The fruit of such knowledge, of learning to contemplate the self-gift that is God, is nothing less than becoming divine.

And importantly in Christ, we learn that to become divine is not to give up our humanity, to radically separate Christian life from life in general, precisely because it is the Word made flesh that offers our humanity, our history, our temporality as a gift to the Father.

Recently, on the feast of the Ascension, Pope Francis I preached regarding Christ:

He always forgives us, He is our advocate, He always defends us. We must never forget this. The Ascension of Jesus into heaven then reveals to us this reality that is so comforting for our journey: in Christ, true God and true man, our humanity was brought to God; He has opened the passage up for us, He is like a leader at the head of the rope when you scale a mountain, who has reached the summit and draws us up to Him, leading us to God. If we entrust our lives to Him, if we let ourselves be guided by Him we are sure to be in safe hands. In the hands of our Savior, our advocate.

It is the humanity of Christ, visible in the wounds that still mark His resurrected and ascended body, which transfigures every facet of our existence into an offering of God. The couple that welcomes a newborn infant comes to know Christ ever more deeply as their own sense of wonder, of exhaustion, of terror at being parents, is offered up to the Father in love. The middle-aged man, who receives a diagnosis of a terminal illness, comes to know Christ as he gives himself over to the reality of the shortness of life, of physical relationships that come to an end. The marginalized, those who are ignored by Church and society alike, enter into Christ's very life as they seek divine love even in the faces of those who seek to mutilate their humanity. We gaze at Christ, we contemplate His humanity, precisely because in Christ, the last human being, we come to know that the only way to be human is not to grasp, to hang on at all costs, to consume until

the last drop, but to give all of our existence away in love. The liturgical rites of the Church, in which we participate fully, consciously, and actively, are central to this process of Christological humanization because through these rites all the sorrows and delights of human existence are offered to the Father through the poetics of lament and of praise.

Our attempt in this issue of *Church Life*, then, is to see anew Jesus Christ as the heart of the Church, as the center of what it means to be human and thus ultimately divine. Such work is integral to the New Evangelization, because it has never been easy to perceive Christ aright. For the earliest disciples, they could not see the Son of Man, the suffering servant; they could not recognize the mission of the One who had come to give the entirety of Himself in the poverty of the Cross and not the power of the throne. They could not see that this Jesus, this One who lowered Himself into the fullness

of our humanity, could be God. Likewise, we continue to seek God among the powerful, among the influential, in signs worthy of what we perceive as divinity. But Christ continues to come to us in the seemingly insufficient sign of the Church and her sacraments, in the precarious poverty of the homeless and the hungry and the aborted and the victim of war and the criminal, in the outwardly meager prayer of the invisible saint, who may never be recognized by Church and society alike. Such is the Christ, whom we seek to recognize when He comes to us in the lapsed Catholics seeking baptism for their children, in the apathetic student who finds Christian teaching an unnecessary accoutrement of a general religious sensibility that we all have, in those who have been wounded by the Church for whatever reason. Christ, fully divine and fully human, comes and comes and comes again, if only we have become attuned to His presence: *Where senses fail, faith alone suffices.*

Such an encounter with Christ, mediated through the life of the Church, is at the heart of the New Evangelization. The New Evangelization is not limited to a pastoral program of increasing Mass attendance, of making sure that every doctrine has been memorized, of shoring up an internal sense of Catholic identity. Instead, the New Evangelization includes inviting all of humanity to participate in the radical peace that the God-man came to inaugurate in His very Person. Such a peace, offered by Jesus the Christ as He breathes upon His disciples in the Resurrection, can only be revealed, become persuasive, when we ourselves abide in this peaceful gift offered by Christ.

