

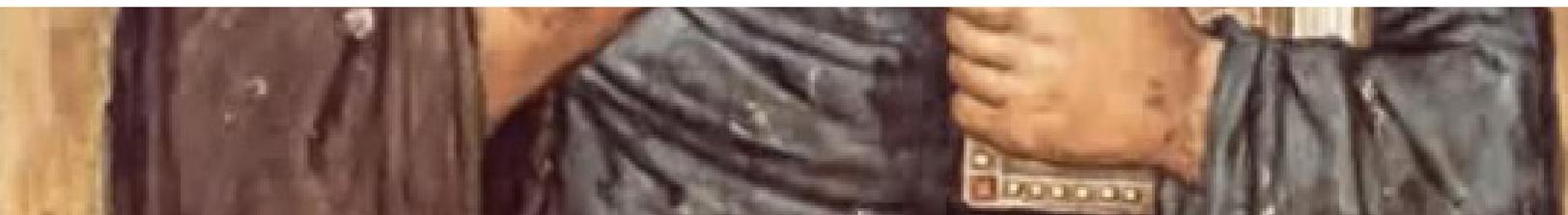
Mitropolitan Jovan Zograf;  
*Pantocrator, Christ Savior and  
Life Giver* (1384); Museum of  
Macedonia (Skopje)



# AN ICON OF THE PEDAGOGY OF FAITH

ENCOUNTERING CHRIST, THE ETERNAL WORD

**BY MEGAN SHEPHERD, M.DIV.**



Within the Catholic high school, formation often becomes fragmented. Differences in staffing, resources, and approaches to ministry lead to a lack of integration among different dimensions of the spiritual life. Students study religion in class, go on retreats, celebrate Mass and earn service hours often overseen by different departments or staff members.

Yet, “it’s all curriculum.” What happens on the athletic field, in conversations on retreat, during class sessions, in afterschool activities, or while in prayer all contribute to the development of young men and women of faith.

This holistic vision of formation guided the restructuring of our campus ministry department at a Chicago high school. In restructuring, we made the decision to lay everything on the table and ask first: “How can we best serve the needs of our students? How can we focus on ministering to people rather than administering programs?”

Our response was to move from two separate departments of Pastoral Ministry and Community Service to create the Department of Formation and Ministry. Guided by a Director, the rest of the staff served as class-level chaplains. We were each responsible for the pastoral formation of one class as we worked to integrate their religious studies courses, service commitments, liturgical celebrations, retreats, and leadership training. We also had a faculty chaplain who oversaw the spiritual formation of staff and faculty.

This transition provided us the opportunity to re-envision how we approach each year of formation and develop new strategies to minister to the specific needs of each class of students. As the Sophomore Chaplain, I had the opportunity to engage with the Religious Studies department as they moved from one semester to a full year of Scripture studies. Viewing all of our ministry efforts with sophomores through the lens of

“Christ, the Eternal Word” provided a holistic vision for connecting their studies, retreats, leadership, liturgy, service commitment, and reflection.

At the beginning of the school year, we joined together in a sophomore class liturgy to share the vision for the year, celebrate in thanksgiving around the table of the Lord, and bless the Bibles that would journey with them throughout the year.

This is the reflection I shared with the sophomore class at that liturgy. I offer it to you as an “icon” of the pedagogy of faith.

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## Encountering Christ, The Eternal Word During Your Sophomore Year

Holy Family Church, Saint Ignatius College Prep, Chicago, IL  
August 31, 2007

This year, you have the privileged opportunity to grow in your relationship with the eternal Word, Christ Jesus. Through your religion course you will study the Scriptures, the holy Word of God, which constantly reveals more and more of God to us. On your retreat you will have the opportunity to share in conversation, activities, and prayer with your classmates and retreat leaders—an opportunity to see Christ in one another. And in your service commitment this year you have the opportunity to imitate Christ through your service to

the poor and the marginalized. This year is a blessed opportunity, but as of right now it is only that—an opportunity. It is up to you to take advantage of this gift.

This year you will study the Scriptures, the revelation of God's self to us. These pages contain the stories of holy men and women over the years who have encountered God and been transformed by grace. The Hebrew Scriptures share the story of the people of Israel beginning with Creation, the fall of Adam and Eve, the Exodus from Egypt, the entrance into the Promised Land, and the struggle of the Israelites to establish a lasting kingdom. In the stories of the prophets, we hear the struggles of the people to be faithful in their everyday lives, and of the holy prophets sent by God to speak the unpopular and difficult truth of their shortcomings. The Psalms offer songs of praise and thanksgiving, lament and petition—the emotions of our human lives.

These words of Scripture are so much more than words. This Bible is not just another book; it is the Word of God, the Word that was spoken from the very beginning of time. This Word, the eternal Word, is Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John doesn't begin with stories of the baby Jesus at Christmas. Instead, the story begins at the very beginning of time itself: "In the beginning" (Jn 1:1). These are the first words in the Bible (Gn 1:1) and the author of the Gospel of John repeats them to remind us that from the very beginning, Christ was present.

As Christians, we read the Old Testament—the Hebrew Scriptures—with this understanding: that Jesus is present in each moment, story, relationship, and event. Rooted in our belief in the Eternal Word, Jesus Christ, we read the stories of the Old Testament with new eyes, eyes that see God working in the world in relationship with people. People like us who make mistakes, fall into sin, make destructive decisions—but also people who are capable of love and compassion, hope and joy.

Despite all of the darkness in the world—sin and death, pain and suffering—our faith holds fast to the belief that

Jesus Christ has triumphed over death. In the Gospels we find the story of this amazing grace: the life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. There are also letters written to the early Christian communities as they begin to live a life of faith in Jesus Christ. We see the light of Christ shining forth over the years. And through study and prayer, we can see that same light shining forth in our world today.

Take a look around you at your classmates and your teachers. Think of your parents, and friends. Jesus Christ is right here in our midst. The Eternal Word—the Son of God—became human, just like us. The glory of God—the light of the world—took on flesh, a body that would suffer and die.

In the letter of St. Paul to the community gathered at Philippi, we hear him encouraging believers to model the selflessness of Jesus Christ. Not the selfishness that was as much a part of the world then as it is today, but a radical commitment to serving others.

The Eternal Word shared in the glory of God yet freely chose to enter into the reality of our human existence. And not just hovering around the edge or finding a nice comfortable niche somewhere, but fully embracing the reality of life and of death. Jesus Christ is the Eternal Word. He became human, became a servant, giving up everything for us—even to the point of death. And through His Death, He brought us all to eternal life.

At Saint Ignatius College Prep, we often use the expression "men and women for others." Jesus Christ is the model for us to follow. He was a man for others with every thought, word, and breath from His first to last. As you begin your sophomore year, strive to become men and women for others in imitation of Jesus Christ. I challenge you to take advantage of every opportunity this year to learn more about Jesus Christ: through your Scripture class, your service commitment, your retreat, and your prayer.

## Class:

In your religion class, keep your mind and heart open to the Word of God. Don't let it become just another class to sit through. While all learning can transform your mind, this course can transform your heart and soul as well. As you read the Scriptures, think about all of the millions of people who have shared these stories with you. Let their faith inspire you. Treat your Bibles with the reverence they deserve. They are the holy words of God. Ask for the Holy Spirit to guide you as you journey through the pages of sacred Scripture this year.

## Service:

Why do we serve? To feel good about ourselves? Because it is required? Because there are people in need? At the heart of why we as Christians serve is Jesus Christ. Out of love for us, Jesus became human and put His entire life at the service of others, even to His Death. If our God loves us so much that he is willing to die for us, how can we do anything BUT love and serve others in return?

Jesus gave us the perfect example of being a man or woman for others—complete selflessness. That is why we ask you to commit during your sophomore year to 20 hours of service at one service site that will stretch you out of your comfort zone and challenge you to serve people who are different from you: people who are poor, marginalized, hungry, sick, aged, homeless, or disabled. In building relationships through your service, our hope is that you see Jesus Christ in the people you serve, as they will see Christ in you. Our God became a servant, and so we are called to serve one another.

## Retreat:

Your Sophomore Retreat will be a unique opportunity to step out of your comfort zone, build new relationships with your classmates and upper-class leaders, and to spend some time in conversation with God. Yes, you will pray on Sophomore Retreat. You will have a lot of fun, too—but one of the reasons we take you away from the daily rhythm of school is to provide you with the time and space to quiet your heart and mind for prayer. The theme of Sophomore Retreat is *Lux Vitae ~ The Light of Life*. We will spend two days reflecting on how the light of Christ shines forth in our lives. Your retreat might be in a few weeks, or a few months. I challenge you to take advantage of the opportunity of those two days to stop and examine yourself, your life, and your relationships with others, but especially with God.

## Prayer:

This year, be sure to talk to God about what is on your mind and heart. Prayer can be as simple as talking with God about your day or praying the *Examen* for 15 minutes before you go to bed. You can ask God for help; thank God for the gifts you have been given; and also take time to just listen.

You begin your sophomore year with the opportunity to learn more about Jesus in the Scriptures, experience Jesus in your classmates on retreat, and model Jesus' service to others. As St. Paul says to the Philippians: "Have among you the same mind that is also yours in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5). Your teachers, friends, upperclassmen, parents, and God are waiting to join with you on this journey of discovery and growth in relationship with Jesus. Let us encounter Christ, the Eternal Word together this year.



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