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## Introduction

Christ is changing the course of human history and affecting the lives of millions of people. He does so even two thousand years after ascending into heaven and leaving his Church in the hands of the apostles. No single person has affected human history and human lives as he has.

Each and every Christian who takes his or her faith seriously is affected by Christ. It is guaranteed that Christ will make his loving presence felt in one way or another and in varying degrees to each one of us. As I sit in the confessional day after day and from that vantage point glimpse the depths of the human condition, I am truly overjoyed and overwhelmed by how Christ deals so personally and deeply with so many souls. The saga of humanity is only understood in the light of Christ.

I experienced the beauty of Christ in a deep way at a clinic in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. After my ordination to the priesthood in the Regnum Christi Movement as a Legionary of Christ, I was assigned to work in a missionary apostolate called Mission Youth. As chaplain to many university students who give their time as missionaries in third-world countries, I spend about six weeks a year working in the city relief efforts. During these missionary trips to Haiti and just as many trips to Mexico, I have been blessed by many beautiful experiences of Christ which I will share in this book.

One day I found myself at the St. Joseph wounds clinic. Located in central Port-au-Prince, it is a small compound that includes three classrooms and a small medicine dispensary. To get there one must pass through a busy Haitian

market. As our vanload of missionaries and two sisters from the Missionaries of Charity squeezed past vendors and shoppers at an agonizingly slow speed, horns were honking, people were shouting, and vendors were hawking everything from water and toothpaste to rat poison. We could have passed more quickly through the market on foot, but our vanload of medical supplies would not have been safe left abandoned in the middle of the market. So we inched along with the vendors parting before us and closing in behind us. After thirty minutes creeping along in this way, we finally arrived at the clinic.

Inside the compound we were met by a difficult sight. In a passageway about eight feet wide and a hundred feet long was a line of sick Haitians waiting to have their bandages removed and their wounds cleaned and rewrapped. These were dirty bandages soaked through with pus, and the emaciated people with many skin diseases not commonly seen by us Americans looked at us imploringly for help.

We were standing amid true suffering, the gray walls and iron gates around us adding to the dismal reality. There was pure misery in this compound, but we could hear liturgical hymns sung in Creole on the other side of the wall, where there was a makeshift open-air chapel that served as a Eucharistic Adoration center. There, over five hundred Haitians were singing and worshipping our Lord in the Eucharist for many hours at a time. Prayer services in Haiti have a charismatic feel to them, as the Haitians love to dance and sing and embellish each song with hand motions and a bit of swaying and turning.

That peaceful music drifted over the walls and provided a beautiful ambience to the whole compound. However, the sight of the sick and dying was still in marked contrast to the uplifting hymns.

Two of Mother Teresa's nuns were busy getting all the medical supplies ready and so, to distract ourselves from the sight, we busied ourselves with the preparations. There were ten of us and a hundred of them. After a few

brief instructions about how to dress the wounds properly, each of us was given medical gloves and a kit containing the antibiotic creams, gauzes, and dressings we would need. I led the missionaries in a quick prayer and turned to the line of patients.

I must admit I almost got sick when I saw my first patient. He was a middle-aged man, about forty-five years old. His face was wrinkled and worn from hard work in the sun. His body was wasted away from malnourishment, and his skin was covered with blotches and sores. But that was nothing compared to what I noticed next. As I looked down at his wound, I saw elephantiasis for the first time. Due to a parasitic infection, his right leg was almost twice the size of his left. The leg was dressed in a dirty white bandage from the shin down revealing the tips of dirty toes that seemed too large to belong to a human. As my stomach did flip-flops, I forced myself to smile at the man and knelt before him.

Beside me the other missionaries were struggling in similar ways, and as the priest of the group, I forced myself to offer encouragement and support. It quickly proved too much for most of the group, but thankfully they were able to exit the scene gracefully in order to help the sisters inside with a large group of babies that needed medical attention. Four of us were left; two *Regnum Christi* consecrated women, another missionary who was a nurse, and me. And so we proceeded.

On the sick man's leg, there was no skin from the shin down—only rotted flesh. As a priest, I am a doctor of souls rather than the body. I wasn't sure how to help him, but I tried my best.

I slowly unwound the bandages, which were stuck to his wounds and caused him pain as they were peeled back. Once the bandages were off, I proceeded to clean out the wound with cotton swabs and the solutions provided by the sisters.

After fifteen minutes spent cleaning the wound, I looked up at the man

and gave him a smile—and *that was when I saw him*. The eyes of the man looking straight at me smiled back at me. I remembered the line from Scripture in which Christ says: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).

I had an overwhelming sensation at that moment that the man I was attending to was Christ himself. Christ was truly there, and he wanted me to know it. I did not see Christ physically, but spiritually I knew without a doubt that the man I was serving was the Lord Jesus, the second Person of the Holy Trinity.

As the minutes went by, I drifted into another world. The Haitian adoration hymns started echoing deeper in my soul, and I started cleaning out the wound with more love. I was like the woman in the Gospel at the feet of Christ washing him with her tears.

As difficult as dressing that wound was, I did not want it to end. I slowly applied the ointments and took my time binding the leg in gauze and bandages. As I finished up and took off the gloves, I stretched out my hand toward the man and traced the sign of the cross on his forehead. I looked into his eyes and knowing I was seeing Christ, I simply said, “*Merci*. Thank you.”

The man stood up and hobbled away. As I finally came out of that mystical state, I saw around me the other missionaries finishing up in silence the wounds of each one of the sick in a similar fashion. There were plenty of tears to go around.

I wanted to find Christ again, so I gathered the kit and sought out the next person in line. I was hungry for more. This time I knelt before a little boy whose foot was run over by a motorcycle, followed by a woman with burns on both her shins, a boy with burns all down his back from falling into a fire, and lastly an old man with only a stump for a foot.

The wounds I saw that day were so repulsive that cleaning them was the hardest thing I have ever done in my life. However, I must say with total

sincerity that it was also the most beautiful thing I have ever done. After two hours we were finished; the time had simply flown by. All the while the adoration next door continued. We were all quite somber as we gathered together to leave. Each one knew that at that moment something beautiful had happened. There, in one of the darkest and most miserable places on the planet, Christ had come to dwell. He walked among us for two hours; we felt his presence everywhere, and for a short while we were no longer in Port-au-Prince, Haiti—we were in heaven.

I have since returned many times to that clinic to help dress wounds, and I cherish each and every second I can spend there with Christ. The missionaries I take are always moved to tears. I have seen them embrace the sick and later only stammer as they try to put into words what the experience was like.

Christ is not simply a historical figure from the past. Experiences of Christ such as these are what continue to allow him to shape and change lives two thousand years after his ascension. These experiences, together with the sacraments of the Church, make me love being a Catholic. It pains me to think that so many people don't know who Christ is, who for whatever reason have never experienced him. *A life without Christ makes no sense. A life without Christ ultimately is not worth living. Period.* No wonder we see so much pain and despair around us as liberal humanity continues to run from the Gospel at breakneck speeds and strives to stamp out any mention of God from society.

Vatican II, the twenty-first ecumenical council of the Catholic Church, rightly sums this up: in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*:

*The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by*

*the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, **fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.***<sup>1</sup>

At the end of this book, Christ, the merciful and majestic King, will still be a mystery. No book can encompass him or reveal the depths of his love and mercy for mankind. However, it is my sincere wish that my missionary stories and the Regnum Christi charism I have received will inspire all those who read about them to know the person of Jesus Christ better and to love him more deeply. Our Lord himself sincerely wishes to become part of your life so that through you he may reach many other souls who are lost without him.

Jesus Christ is a treasure that we are called to share with others; he is not a special secret in our lives that we value quietly and keep safely locked up somewhere. Christ longs to be shared with others. May this book be a step in that direction.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, 22 (emphasis added); [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

**PART ONE**  
**WHO IS CHRIST?**

## CHAPTER ONE

### Christ and Sinners

One of my favorite saints is St. Faustina Kowalska. She had a beautiful relationship with Christ that she carefully detailed in her notebooks. These notebooks were bound together in the now famous book *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska: Divine Mercy in My Soul*. When I page through her diary, I can't help but notice how much the Lord loves to forgive sinners and cover them with his mercy. Page after page, the Lord invites Faustina to speak of his mercy, to write of his mercy, and above all to trust in his mercy. In a particularly inspiring text, Jesus tells Faustina that priests need but mention the word "mercy" from the pulpit and the hardest hearts will be moved:

*The Lord said to me, My daughter, do not tire of proclaiming My mercy. In this way you will refresh this Heart of Mine, which burns with a flame of pity for sinners. Tell My priests that hardened sinners will repent on hearing their words when they speak about My unfathomable mercy, about the compassion I have for them in My Heart. To priests who proclaim and extol My mercy, I will give wondrous power; I will anoint their words and touch the hearts of those to whom they will speak.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska: Divine Mercy in My Soul* (Stockbridge, Mass.: Marian Press, 2010), 1521.

Mercy best describes the beautiful heart of Christ. As a priest I have had many poignant experiences in the confessional that helped me to understand the beauty of Divine Mercy and the depths of God's love. After hours in the confessional spent witnessing the conversion of hearts and tears of repentance, I now understand why Christ so loves being merciful and forgiving.

The Gospels are another place we witness the tender mercy of Christ. He was always available for the crowds, never turning them away even when he was physically exhausted. He wept over Jerusalem and for his lost children. He wished to gather the whole of humanity into his arms. Christ's openness to all peoples and his words of compassion made him a magnet for humanity. Where Christ traveled there were always crowds of people seeking him out.

In the Gospel of John, we find the story of the adulterous woman. Rather than being a story about sin and its consequences or sin and conversion, it is above all a story of the mercy of God. We read:

*Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand before all of them. (John 8:1–3)*

Before Christ made any major decision or did any special work, he usually spent the night in prayer. He knew that he would encounter this poor woman the next morning, and I'm sure he prayed for her to his Father. That morning he would reveal in a special way his love and mercy; he would touch her soul and invite her to a life lived in grace and without sin.

The Pharisees had a hidden agenda. They were using the woman to accomplish two things: Not only did they wish to stone the woman for her sin—through her they also wished to trap the rabbi from Nazareth. If he

upheld the law and condemned her, he would contradict his own teaching of love and compassion as well as lose the merciful and kind rabbi image he personified. If he disobeyed the law, then he was just as guilty as the woman, and they would have cause to accuse him.

*They said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. (John 8:4–6)*

The plight of the woman was made even worse by the fact that she alone, and not the man, was suffering the punishment of their sin. She was singled out and the man let free. Who knows the depths of her misery? Who knows what really was happening in her life? She was married, but where is her husband? Where are the witnesses? Was she forced by a passing man into the sin? I don't wish to mitigate her guilt, but surely a quick judgment on her situation would be superficial. The human experience is too deep and complicated to simply condemn on a hasty judgment. This is something I have learned so often in the confessional.

So the woman found herself at the feet of Christ, at the feet of Mercy himself. Little did these scribes and Pharisees know that Christ was about to stun them all. He would surprise them by showing them their *own* sin and broken human nature.

Jesus was quick to respond. His heart immediately went out to the woman, but in his gentleness and majesty, he preferred to deal with her privately, on a personal level. Publicly before the crowd was no way to approach a woman in this situation.

So Jesus bent down into the dust. He lowered himself before all who are present. He began to write on the ground, in words large enough for everyone

to see. The image of the Master—God himself—kneeling in the dust and drawing in the sand, must have been a sight to see.

I wish we knew what he wrote, but John is quiet about the details. Down through the centuries various theologians, pastors, and saints have wondered about this same question. It should be noted that Christ wrote with his *finger* on the ground. In the Old Testament, Moses receives the Ten Commandments from God, which God traced with his *finger* onto the stone tablets. When we realize that the same hand that wrote on the tablets also wrote the words on the ground, we can draw our own conclusions. Perhaps Christ began to write out the Ten Commandments before the crowd of people. There in the dust Jesus might have spelled out the laws of the Lord.

When he finished writing the Pharisees were not sure how to interpret Jesus' action, so they ignored the writing and addressed Jesus again. They repeated their question. We read:

*When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. (John 8:7–9)*

The men went away one by one as Christ bent down to write again. Whatever he wrote on the ground caused each man to reconsider his actions and depart from the scene. I imagine that Christ could have written either a particular sin or a name next to the list of the Ten Commandments. Perhaps the men each saw his own name written out, or a particular sin that he had committed.

Either way the men saw themselves and their own lives written out before them in the dirt. The frailty of their humanity was brought to their awareness. Here they had stood as if innocent and righteous. Yet Christ somehow made

them realize that the only difference between them and the woman was that she had been caught. The truth was too much for them to face, and so they turned away. They abandoned Christ, who could have healed them of their plight. Instead they chose to take the wide road that led away from Christ.

### **A BROKEN MAN MADE WHOLE**

Before I return to the woman at Christ's feet, I would like to relay a story that occurred to me within a month of my ordination. I happened to be flying home to Chicago on a two-hour flight. As I boarded the plane and took my seat next to a middle-aged gentleman, I knew something was up; I could sense the need in his soul for Christ. A multitude of sins and deep sorrow in a human heart cannot be hidden. We are made to be with God, living in communion with him. To live far from him in a state of sin is unnatural and does violence to our very being. I sensed immediately that the man desperately needed to talk.

As a fisher of men, I started devising a way to strike up a friendly conversation with the man, but I was hampered by man's new best friend: the iPod. He was "plugged in," and his body language made it clear he did not want to talk. His face, however, depicted a man at war with himself. He wanted to talk, but he was not ready. I had no other choice but to sit and wait and pray. I opened my breviary and started praying.

For the entire two-hour flight, the man paid attention only to his iPod. Toward the end of the flight, as we began our descent, he finally took off the earplugs and headed for the restroom. As he came back I saw my chance and casually ventured a question.

"Headed to Chicago for work?" I asked.

He looked at me and said, "No, I am just passing through on my way out west." And he continued almost immediately: "Father, I'm not right with God—I need to talk with you."

It wasn't news to me that he needed to talk, but his frankness and willingness to do so was surprising. I encouraged him to just let it all out. During the last ten minutes of the flight, he poured out his heart along with a multitude of sins. Suffice to say he was a very broken man, a miserable man. He sought joy and pleasure but never found them—he only dug himself deeper into sin.

As he finished his story, I spoke to him of God's mercy, having the words of Christ to Faustina present in my mind. Tears filled the man's eyes. As the plane touched down, I told the man, "Look, here is what we'll do. Once we get to the gate, we'll go into the terminal and find an empty spot. I will hear your confession, and then once again you will be right with God."

He readily agreed and followed me into the terminal. I found a quiet spot out of earshot of anyone, and we sat down. He made a thorough confession of his sins, and I gave him more words of mercy and encouragement. As I absolved him he was in tears again.

As I made the Sign of the Cross over him, it struck me how beautiful that moment was. Here was a broken man made whole. Here was a human heart full of pain, now soothed and healed. Here was a multitude of vile sins festering in this man's soul, and now he was made clean. Here was a fallen son of God, a child now living in darkness brought into the light. Here was a man once full of pride with many walls and obstacles around his heart that kept Christ out, and now the walls had been torn down and Christ had entered.

Moments like this are some of the most encouraging ones for a priest. I can see why Christ loves being merciful. Only when we are down and out, lost in our sin and weakness, can we truly appreciate the gift of mercy and the beauty of being picked up by a merciful God and pressed close to his heart.

Let's return to the woman at Christ's feet. I see in Christ the same joy that I experience upon bringing a sinner home. He didn't see a broken woman, a sinful person—he saw his own beloved child. She had no idea the amount of love Christ had for her!

*When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" (John 8:9–10)*

As the woman looked around, she saw only Christ. This is how our judgment will be. When our soul passes from our mortal bodies into eternity, we will be brought into heaven. We will stand before the Lord. There we will be alone with Christ. The world will not be able to accuse us. No one else will have a say—only Christ. Only Christ sees us as we truly are. There, in his eyes, is truth. And the most wonderful reality is that the One who sees us as we are is Mercy himself. Christ told Faustina that before he comes as a just judge, he comes as a King of mercy.

The poor woman in this story only began to grasp the beautiful gift of Divine Mercy.

*She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." (John 8:11)*

I pray that these words will be the words of Christ to each one of us. He does not condemn us. We condemn ourselves. To persist in sin is to persist in walking away from God, leaving the house of the Father. God did not create hell; man did. Man creates it every time he walks away from God. When we walk toward Christ, we walk into the arms of heaven.

It is very important to have a Christ-centered approach when we reflect on all that happens to us after our time on Earth is finished. Death is our soul encountering Christ. Our judgment is Christ judging us. Purgatory is Christ purifying us. Heaven is Christ embracing us. Only hell falls outside of Christ. Hell is complete separation from Christ.

The woman before Christ was lifted up. She realized she was a beloved daughter of God. She was made whole; her life was complete. Whatever dark roads she traveled on were now clear and bright because she walked with Christ.

Christ always reaches out his hands to us; he always offers to make the journey of life with us.

*With My mercy, I pursue sinners along all their paths, and My Heart rejoices when they return to Me. I forget the bitterness with which they fed My Heart and rejoice at their return.*

*Tell sinners that no one shall escape My Hand; if they run away from My Merciful Heart, they will fall into My Just hands. Tell sinners that I am always waiting for them, that I listen intently to the beating of their heart... when will it beat for Me?<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> *Diary*, 1728.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Christ and Saints

As great as the saving work of Christ is for us, it would be a terrible mistake to reduce it to simply saving us from sin. There is much more to the Christian story than just salvation. Christ came to call sinners so that, once returned to the sheepfold, sinners could become great saints. He did not come to point an accusing finger and then watch us crawl back to him begging for mercy. His mission was to set ablaze a fire of love on earth that would transform us all into his likeness. Our transformation into Christ is the goal of human existence.

#### SAVING GRACE

Some Christian churches completely center around the concept of “saving grace.” Such preaching, writings, and hymns reflect a deep desire for salvation and a deep thanksgiving for the removal of their sins by the cross of Christ.

Near my residence in Chicago, there are four Protestant churches. These churches have signs out front with motivational messages on them designed to catch the attention of passing motorists. While I understand that the message boards do inspire the occasional soul, I can’t help but feel that they do a disservice to Christianity. Most often, these signs convey cute messages about the need to be saved by Jesus. For example:

*Walmart is not the only saving place.  
All who come in as sinners go out as winners.  
Morally bankrupt? God offers instant credit.  
Extreme savings offered here—no coupons required.*

While the signs may be catchy, the beauty of our faith can't be reduced to a blinking neon sign. Did Christ come to simply make us "winners"? Is the Church a place of "extreme savings" on par with popular department stores? I know the churches that sponsor these signs don't mean to portray a cheap pop culture version of Christianity, but often that is the message received by non-churchgoing passersby.

Much of pop Christian music is also based solely on bringing your sin and weakness to Jesus. With the exception of some great songwriters, the overall message is depressing and goes something like this:

*I'm a wretch, I'm too weak, and I'm a disaster. I'm full of sin. But now Jesus has come, and I am saved from my sin and weakness and the wrath of God. I am saved.*

The picture this paints is that of millions of souls adrift on a dark and stormy ocean. Jesus passes by in a small boat, scooping the poor sinners out of the water and saving them from drowning. There, in the small boat, soaked to the bone and miserably shaking from the cold, the saved wretches cling to the feet of Christ. The storm goes on, they huddle around Jesus, and then the curtain drops—end of story. Everyone goes to heaven and frolics among the lions and the lambs.

This picture does not do justice to the amazing journey of the spiritual life or the depths of Christ's love for each individual soul. Conversion is only the beginning. Christ pulls us out of the water of sin by dying on the cross

out of an immense personal love for us. He then holds us close to his Sacred Heart through the sacraments and transforms us into sons and daughters of his Heavenly Father. By grace we are clothed in the fine robes of the Father, fed with the bread of angels, and allowed to enter into heaven as saints wearing a crown of glory.

Through the gift of sanctifying grace, God calls man to live and radiate love, sharing in his divine life here on earth and completely and for all eternity in heaven. Christ did not come to simply restore the Garden of Eden to its original state; God draws a greater good from evil, not just simply an equal good. He elevated the destiny of humanity by allowing us to become adopted sons and daughters through baptism in his Son. Rather than return us to the original Garden of Eden, he now brings us into the Celestial Garden, the garden of his Church, the Mystical Body of Christ. Heaven is not, as some portray it, a sort of glorified petting zoo. Heaven is spending all eternity in the loving embrace of God the Father!

One's spiritual life does not stop on the day of one's baptism or profound conversion. Those moments are only the beginning of a life of grace. As a Catholic priest, I daily experience on the one hand my own misery and human weakness, and on the other the immense power of God's grace working through me. My brother priests and I are privileged to look into the heart of man through the sacrament of reconciliation. How many souls arrive at our confessional broken and weak! Yet they rise up from their knees strengthened by grace, and over time they grow and are transformed by love. They become tireless apostles with loving hearts, and little by little, they become saints.

### **ROSALI'S STORY**

One little orphan girl I met in Haiti was named Rosali. Abandoned at birth, she had been raised by the loving care of the sisters of the Missionaries of

Charity. Now eight years old, Rosali was dying of HIV. At first there was nothing about her that caught my attention, until one day I saw how she interacted with the other orphans, most of whom are much younger than she.

One afternoon lollipops were passed out to the children who eagerly ripped off the plastic and began to devour the candy. Rosali stuck hers into her pocket for the time being. Later, when the children had finished their candy, Rosali pulled out her own lollipop. The lollipops were quite large, and Rosali broke hers into little pieces. She walked around the playground giving a small piece to each of the other orphans, beginning with the smallest. I was touched by her generosity. The next day I witnessed her do the same thing, this time with a small bag of chips. She never took any for herself, but with motherly care watched over the rest of the orphans.

Orphan children are usually self-centered and defensive. Life has been very harsh to them, and they learn early on to fend for themselves. Where did Rosali get such a big heart? I found the answer minutes later. A sister walked into the orphanage and gathered some of the children around a statue of Mary that was in the playground area. The sister led the children in prayer, making the Sign of the Cross. Rosali was at her side, fervently joining in the prayers. Later I saw her at Mass with the sisters, kneeling as they do, looking to them and copying all their movements and responses during the Mass. Rosali had lived her whole life with these remarkable women. She had learned from them the generosity and love that she poured out upon her fellow orphans.

Rosali's life story could never be summed up by simply being saved from abandonment and living life as a poor orphan. Her life had a second and more beautiful moment, a life transformed by grace, being touched by Christ, becoming each day more like him as she became each day more like the sisters. Rosali, due to her illness, will probably never live long enough to join the sisters

by wearing the habit and dedicating her life to the poor. But in my book she is a living saint.

### TRANSFORMING GRACE

The previous chapter ended with the conversion of the sinful woman caught in adultery. She was saved by Christ and made a daughter of God, but her conversion was only the first moment in her life of grace. Afterward she began a journey, following the footsteps of Christ, that led her to sainthood. This second moment is the moment of “transforming grace.” To remain at the “saving grace” moment is to truncate Christianity.

The long line of Catholic saints testifies to the beauty of transforming grace and reveal to us that Christianity is not about overcoming vices; it is about growing in virtue and being transformed by the purest love of God. Let us look at several of these saints.

#### *St. Peter*

St. Peter is the perfect example of a man who *became* a saint by following Christ and allowing the Lord to work in his life. His first encounter with Christ was in a fisherman’s boat. After grudgingly casting his nets to the sea, he was overcome by a great miracle, the miraculous catch of fish. As a seasoned fisherman, Peter knew immediately that this event had a touch of the divine upon it. Deeply humbled, he knelt before Jesus and begged for mercy. Jesus lifted Peter up and invited him to become a fisher of men. At that moment Peter was brought into the light and made a man living for God. His conversion realized, his transformation into *Saint* Peter now began.

In the Gospel we see Peter again and again struggling to love Christ with his whole heart. His weakness still caused him to stumble and fall. He tried to persuade Christ to forego his passion and death, he denied the Master, and

he ran from the cross. His remorse on Holy Thursday and Good Friday was a second baptism for him. This was not simply a sorrowful moment when Peter hit rock bottom; his tears were transformative. They were a moment of grace. They led him ultimately to run to the empty tomb on Easter Sunday and to stand up fearlessly before the whole city of Jerusalem on Pentecost.

What would Peter have been without “transforming grace”? His initial encounter with Christ brought him to understand God’s role in his life. However, had the miracle not been accompanied by the call to follow Christ, without the subsequent three years of slow transformation by living with the Master, the fisherman Peter would be a forgotten, nameless man who lived around 30 AD. Nothing more.

But *Simon* Peter became *Saint* Peter, the leader of the apostles. He became the fearless disciple of Christ who led the early Church and who gave up his life in painful martyrdom. The “saved” Peter pales in comparison to the “transformed” Peter. Towards the end of his life he wrote in a letter:

*Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” (1 Peter 1:15–16)*

*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9–10)*

### ***St. Paul***

St. Paul is another good example. Before he encountered Christ he was a tent maker from Tarsus, the passionate son of a Pharisee. In Tarsus he was surrounded by Gentile cultures, far from Jerusalem. His close encounters with

these Gentiles made him a perfect candidate to become the “Apostle to the Gentiles.” As a faithful Jew, his dismay at the whole Jesus of Nazareth event was understandable. Rumors and news have a way of becoming twisted and warped as they spread. News of a new rabbi from Nazareth reached Tarsus—one who performed many signs but also broke the Sabbath. He spoke of destroying the temple. He claimed God was his Father. To the ears of a faithful Jew, this was blasphemy, and any attack on the Temple was an attack on the heart of the Jewish religion.

It is only natural that Saul, as he was originally called, felt righteous indignation at these “Followers of the Way.” Then came his initial moment of grace on the road to Damascus. Saul encountered Christ in a mysterious way. He fell to the ground, confronted by a burst of light. Our Lord revealed to Saul that, by attacking his followers, Saul was attacking Christ himself.

After this “saving grace” event in his life, his journey to become *Saint Paul* began. Without transforming grace, Paul might have remained a simple tent maker in Tarsus, but with it he became St. Paul, the apostle *par excellence*. His fire of love grew each day, as did his transformation “into Christ.” This fire was poured into his journeys and writings. He was not a man of elegant written words; rather his letters are punchy and strong, full of zeal. They contain many maxims that were the basis of his new life in Christ and the basis of his preaching in the early Church. We read:

*I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*  
(Galatians 2:20)

He became “another Christ.” Later in the letter to the Galatians, Paul alludes to having the “marks of Christ on his body” (Galatians 6:17). Some

have interpreted this as a possible allusion to his carrying the stigmata (the physical wounds of Jesus). This is debatable, but what is certain is that, as each day went by, Paul's heart looked more and more like the heart of Christ. Those who encountered Paul encountered the living Christ.

If we go beyond the pages of the New Testament to the saints that have graced the Church down through the ages, we continue to encounter this beautiful reality: Christ is at work in his beloved disciples. *Each soul encounters a unique facet of Christ, and each soul is led down a totally unique pathway to holiness. While they have many resemblances, no two saints are alike and Christ does not want us to repeat the holiness of any other saint.* There are obviously similarities between the saints, but each is unique.

### *St. Faustina*

St. Faustina spoke of her relationship to Christ as entering into a whole new world. She wrote:

*The interior of my soul is like a large and magnificent world in which God and I live. Except for God, no one is allowed there. At the beginning of this life with God, I was dazzled and overcome with awe. His radiance blinded me, and I thought He was not in my heart; and yet those were the moments when God was working in my soul. Love was becoming purer and stronger, and the Lord brought my will into the closest union with His own holy will. No one will understand what I experience in that splendid place of my soul where I abide constantly with my Beloved.<sup>1</sup>*

The life of grace is a “large and magnificent world” for us to explore. The more we go into prayer and go deeper into the spiritual life, the more this

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<sup>1</sup> *Diary*, 582

world opens up before us. So many people never reach this understanding because the noise of our culture and the frantic pace of life keep them from ever sinking into the depths of God's love. They race and skip over the surface of life so quickly that they never have time to ponder and pray.

### *St. John of the Cross*

In my opinion, the saint who most masterfully explains the spiritual life is St. John of the Cross. His poems of love are some of the most beautiful in Christian literature. *Only through a deep love can a follower of Christ enter into his Heart and detect his deepest feelings, his liveliest desires and the intensity of his love.* John of the Cross did this masterfully in his lifetime, and his works radiate the love of Christ. His writings have such a depth to them that one may not find them particularly helpful in the beginning. In his poem "Living Flame of Love," he writes:

*O living flame of love  
that tenderly wounds my soul  
in its deepest center! Since  
now you are not oppressive,  
now consummate! if it be your will:  
tear through the veil of this sweet encounter!*<sup>2</sup>

The living flame of love is Divine Love. The image St. John used to explain this poem is a log of wood thrown on the fire. At first the log is burned and blackened. This is the moment of the spiritual life when the soul rids itself of vices; it is the moment of dying to self. Little by little it begins to heat up until it becomes enflamed and burns. This signifies much activity; the flames

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<sup>2</sup> John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*.

sweep over the wood and resemble the soul alive in many virtues and good works. Then at last the flames die down and the log glows ardently, at its hottest temperature and peacefully transmitting its light and heat to all around it.

One can just see St. John of the Cross in the cold and windswept region of Castilla in Spain throwing another log onto his hearth and watching this pattern repeat itself over and over again. This is how the soul approaches God: first it burns, then it is enflamed, and finally it glows. He ends his poem with this stanza:

*How gently and lovingly  
you wake in my heart,  
where in secret you dwell alone;  
and in your sweet breathing,  
filled with good and glory,  
how tenderly you swell my heart with love.<sup>3</sup>*

A saint has a heart that swells with love. This love impels the soul to great and marvelous works. *The goal of our lives must be Christ—to know him, love him, follow him, and make him known to others.* This love frees the soul. As children of God, nothing hinders our souls or ever takes away our peace. Imprisonment can't stop us from loving. Sickness can't stop us from preaching Christ. In all things, it is Christ who lives and moves in us. Our experience of God's love in Christ necessarily becomes something living. For Christians, experiencing Christ deeply means living *in* love, living *to* love, and nourishing our life *on* love. Our lives can have no other motivation, meaning, or goal than Christian love.

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<sup>3</sup> John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Christ on the Island

Christ is revealed most fully in his post-resurrection glory. Before his passion and death, Christ's glory was hidden in his humanity. Although his public life provides some glimpses of his glory in the many miracles and in his transfiguration, it is only when Christ rose from the dead that his glorified personhood shone forth.

There is something awe-inspiring and beautiful about Christ, even before his resurrection. But on Easter Sunday Jesus Christ, both divine and human, both eternal and majestic, truly shines forth in all his splendor.

When we contemplate Christ, the eternal and kingly dimension of his person can never be forgotten. There is something seriously missing in the "gentle Jesus," the "hippy Jesus," and the "political Jesus" that have been at times presented to us.

To know Jesus you must know him as he truly is: the Alpha and the Omega. This is the Jesus we will meet in the next three chapters. We will begin with an appearance of our Lord to St. John the Evangelist.

#### THE BELOVED DISCIPLE

The martyrdom of St. John the Evangelist was in one sense the hardest martyrdom of any of the apostles. John was not actually martyred in the strict sense of the word. Instead his life was a slow martyrdom, a gradual outpouring of self.