

Who Do You Say That I Am?

THE CATECHIST'S GUIDE TO

Jesus in the Gospels

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The Holy Scriptures are the Word of God. The Word of God forms us into living Christs, and this formation goes far beyond information, instruction, edification or inspiration. This formation requires eating the Word, chewing on it, digesting it, and thus letting it become true nourishment. Thus the Word descends from our minds into our hearts and there finds a dwelling place. This is what meditation is all about. It is the discipline of inner attentiveness to the Word. Among the many texts the church presents to us each year, there might be one word, one story, one parable, one sentence that has the power to turn us around, to change our whole life, to give us a new heart and new mind, to conform us to Christ.

—HENRI J.M. NOUWEN

(1932-1996) Catholic psychologist and spiritual writer
The Selfless Way of Christ (2007)

A Word to the Catechist

“Jesus no longer belongs to the past, but lives in the present and is projected towards the future. God’s newness appears to us as victory over sin, evil and death, over everything that crushes life and makes it seem less human. Let the risen Jesus enter your life, welcome him as a friend, with trust: he is life! If up till now you have kept him at a distance, step forward. He will receive you with open arms. If you have been indifferent, take a risk. You won’t be disappointed. If following him seems difficult, don’t be afraid, trust him, be confident that he is close to you. He is with you and will give you the peace you are looking for and the strength to live as he would have you do.”

—POPE FRANCIS
Homily, March 30, 2013

We call ourselves Christians. We are proud to be identified by our belief in Jesus as the Christ. Our faith is unique because we believe that in no other person is God’s self-revelation to us more clearly expressed than in and through Jesus of Nazareth. Thus being a Christian demands knowing who Jesus is. Each of us must answer the challenging question that Jesus asked his disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” (Mk 8:29). So what is your answer?

To this life-changing question, the disciple Peter blurts out that Jesus is “the Christ” (the Greek word for *anointed*—meaning the anointed one (Hebrew *messiah*) whom God will send for the salvation and reconciliation of all humanity with God. But Jesus reminds Peter and the other the disciples that the real meaning of the Christ of God will be known only through his suffering. And so did it come to be. After Jesus’ political murder by crucifixion by the Roman authorities in collusion with the Judean religious leaders and his surprising resurrection to new life, Jesus’ disciples formed a community of belief and practice to continue his vision and values. They proclaimed

to the world the Christian message: Jesus of Nazareth is truly the promised Christ who suffered, died and rose from the dead—and this is our salvation! Their proclamation is still the essence of our Christian faith in Jesus today.

Where Our Search Will Take Us

In this *Catechist's Guide to Jesus in the Gospels* I have tried to present briefly and clearly what is needed to understand Jesus today. The information in this book is not entirely new, for every study of Jesus (commonly called a Christology) focuses on two main issues: the identity or person of Jesus and his words and deeds. So I treat the same familiar range of topics: his identity and titles, his teaching, parables, miracles, suffering, death and resurrection. But the approach and arrangement of these topics is my own. The four parts of the book and each individual chapter are guided by questions found in the gospel texts by persons eager to learn more about Jesus.

In **Part One (chapters 1–2)** we begin with two orientation chapters that set the direction for our search for Jesus and provide background about our major sources, the four gospels found in our Christian New Testament.

In **chapter 1** we consider how best to begin our search to discover Jesus' identity, in particular why we must turn to the gospels because they were the original catechetical texts in which Christians formulated their basic beliefs and values and so were used for instructing new converts (then and now) in the basics of the Christian faith. We will also briefly consider the important first-century historical and cultural clues to his identity—gender, geography and genealogy—and discover the human Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee.

In **chapter 2**, we will look more closely at the reason why the gospels, which are our primary source for learning about Jesus, were written down starting only in the last third of the first century, about forty years after Jesus' death. We will also consider why their narrative or story form through its structure and characterization not only helps us learn about Jesus' identity but also helps us understand our own identity as Christians.

In **Part Two (chapters 3–7)**, Jesus' important relationships or “affiliations” (Latin, related as a son, sonship) provide us with a lens through which we can understand him. He was a “son” in several different ways: a son in his family, in his religious and ethnic heritage, in his new community, and in his

relationship to God. Each of these different sonships will help us understand more fully who he was, what he did and why he did it.

Each of these sonships also confers a title of honor on Jesus. These titles are clues about the public honor and status that Jesus could claim and that the gospel writers wanted their audience to acknowledge. These “honor claims” also create expectations about the kind of behavior that such a person like Jesus ought to exhibit.

In **chapter 3**, we situate Jesus in his home town of Nazareth in Galilee and learn what that place meant both to Jesus and to others who knew him. **Chapter 4** then considers Jesus as the son of Joseph and Mary. We will look at information from the gospels about Jesus’ family and examine two other clues found in the gospels: his age and occupation. Jesus was a “thirty-something” skilled craftsman when he left his family to begin his public ministry of announcing and building God’s new kingdom community.

In **chapter 5**, we will investigate Jesus’ identity as an Israelite, a son of Abraham and of David, the promised messiah or anointed one (Greek, *christos*) sent by God as the divine agent who would restore the broken relationship between God and God’s covenant people. To understand what that title meant, we will look at how *messiah* shifted in meaning throughout Jewish history and what Jews of Jesus’ time expected the messiah to be.

In **chapter 6**, we explore Jesus as the bearer of the new age. In that role, Jesus spoke of himself as the “son of man.” Heavily indebted to Old Testament prophecy, this self-designation can mean simply a human being, or it can take on an association with the end times, when God will send a divine agent to inaugurate the final transformation of our world. This title, “son of man,” locates Jesus between the human realm and the divine realm, and thus thrusts him into a “more than ordinarily human” form of existence.

Chapter 7 examines what it meant when the Christian community proclaimed Jesus as the son of God, honoring Jesus with divine status because of his resurrection and exaltation. Not only does this designation help explain the close relationship of Jesus and God, but it also clarifies his role as God’s messenger, sent into the world to restore it to right relationship with God.

In **Part Three (chapters 8–13)**, we shift our attention from Jesus’ person to the words and works of his public ministry. **Chapter 8** explores the goal

that focused his ministry, the proclamation of a new way of relating to God and to others, which he called the kingdom of God. As teacher of this new kingdom way, he dedicated his life in service to God's presence in our world.

Chapters 9–11 consider the tasks, roles and strategies that Jesus the teacher adopted to accomplish his goal of building God's kingdom. As a prophet (**chapter 9**), Jesus used parables to teach people how to discover God's presence in their ordinary lives. As a priest (**chapter 10**), Jesus used the common meal to teach people how to celebrate God's presence. As a king (**chapter 11**), Jesus offered his wisdom and deeds of power (miracles) to teach people how to reorder their lives around God's presence.

Chapter 12 looks at the significance of Jesus' suffering and death. His death was not accidental but the direct consequence of his claims as son, his goal of establishing a new kingdom, and his roles as prophet, priest and king.

In **chapter 13**, we examine the "good news" of Jesus' resurrection. Had the gospels ended with his death, they would have not been news, let alone good news for anyone. Jesus' resurrection to new life provided a way for his followers to make sense of his death as God's honorable son. The indivisible linking of Jesus' life, death and resurrection is the good news that serves as the foundation of Christian experience and also as the source of Christians' hope and the motivation for their mission.

In **Part Four, chapters 14–16**, we explore the application of what we have learned to our own attempt to be Christ's followers today. This also involves some suggested resources for further study of the gospels and some questions that we might use for either personal reflection or small group discussion while working our way through this book.

In **chapter 14**, we recognize that the risen Christ is alive and well and inviting us to follow and to live out the kind of relationship with God and with one another that Jesus taught. Jesus the teacher is still inviting us to "come and see," become his disciples, learn from him and continue his work.

Chapter 15 offers some suggestions about further books and resources that will enhance your knowledge of Jesus and help you continue your search. Finally, **Chapter 16** lists some questions to help you assimilate what you are reading and studying in this book either through your own personal reflection or sharing with others in a small study group.

What This Book Offers

As catechists, we need to recall Pope John Paul II's reminder that the real goal of catechesis is not information about doctrine but a relationship to Jesus.

“At the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a person, the person of Jesus of Nazareth, ‘the only Son from the Father...full of grace and truth,’ who suffered and died for us and who now, after rising, is living with us forever. Jesus is ‘the way, and the truth, and the life,’ and Christian living consists in following Christ. Accordingly, **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.”

—POPE JOHN PAUL II
(1920–2005) *Catechesi Tradendae*, #5 (1979)

So if our catechetical efforts are supposed to put people into intimate communion with Jesus, then we must first learn who he is and be attentive to our own relationship with him. But where and how are we to discover Jesus' identity and the good news he proclaimed through his words and deeds?

In the first century I imagine someone asked the catechist Mark to summarize the basic Christian message about Jesus, and as a response he came up with the gospel story of Jesus as the best way to share with others—especially new converts to the Christian way—the fundamentals of what they needed to know in order to be a follower of Jesus. Mark's gospel soon became known to other Christian communities and then other catechists—Matthew, Luke and John—followed his lead but adapted Mark's gospel for the special situations and needs of their communities.

So today if in our situation we want to know what we need now to be followers of Jesus, we must first return to these four gospels as the primary way to discover the basics of our Christian faith—who Jesus was, what he said and did, and how we can build a relationship with him in a community of those who accept his message and are trying to live by it.

Of course, the story of Jesus as presented in the gospels did not solve all the problems that later arose in the Church's long history, and this was the main reason that the Church's answers and explanations had to be phrased in more careful and precise theological terms, which we call *dogma* (Greek for a teaching) or doctrines which were then elaborated on by theologians

struggling to explain their meaning. But while these theological formulas and explanations of our Christian truth do indeed give more precision, they must always be grounded on and cannot contradict the truths that are presented in the gospels. So we will concentrate on the portrait of Jesus and his message as set forth in the four gospels and leave the further historical and theological study of Christology for others to write about.

Christianity: Call and Challenge

As we try to meet Jesus through our reading and study of the gospels, we must always remember that they are not merely stories of the life of Jesus. They are proclamations of the Christian message. In confronting them, we are in the same situation as those who listened to the sermons of the first disciples. Hearing this message always demands a response from us.

The Christian good news is both a call and an invitation to a new way of life. Christian faith is a new way of seeing and a new way of being. It invites us to see and evaluate the world in the way Jesus did. Paul describes this process as putting on the mind of Christ. We, too, must notice the way God's mysterious presence is now breaking into our world to achieve salvation. We must realize the loving relationship with which God embraces us. We must recognize how precious each human person is to God.

“Jesus wants evangelizers who proclaim the good news not only with words, but above all by a life transfigured by God's presence.”

—*POPE FRANCIS*
The Joy of the Gospel, #259 (2013)

As we become more and more like Jesus, we will become persons who sense God's presence, detect God's ways and speak God's truth to our world. Like Jesus, we become healers who transmit God's power to give and renew life by our own zest for life.

We will become expressions of Jesus' presence for those in our world who do not know him. Just as the actions of Jesus affirmed what he taught, so our actions will proclaim what we believe—Jesus suffered, died, and rose from the dead—and this is our salvation.