

Finding Jesus is a lifelong process

A scripture scholar reflects on a 30 year career of trying to get Jesus.

BY ALICE CAMILLE

And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:7b–8)

There's a 19th-century Methodist hymn I hope they play at my funeral someday: "Give Me Jesus." The refrain declares with great confidence and not a little weariness: "You may have all this world, give me Jesus."

It's easy to arrive at this conclusion when global society is in shambles, as it has felt in recent years. It can be more challenging to fork over all material assets when things are going rather better. These days, I turn off the news and say without hesitation, "Give me Jesus!"

St. Paul seems to have arrived at the same illumination when he determined to go into the boisterous society of Corinth preaching nothing but "Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). As a Pharisee, Paul was an expert in rabbinic learning. As a citizen of the Roman Empire, he was also versed in the methods of Greek discourse. But Paul abandoned these persuasive skills of rhetoric in favor of delivering Jesus without embroidery.

Hildegard of Bingen made a similar observation, describing how the soul follows the body through its journey of powers. She noted that children naturally exercise the gift of simplicity, which is all they know. In young adulthood, personal strength is the primary asset on which we rely. Elders capitalize on the power of wisdom gained through experience. But the very old, Hildegard perceived, grow weary of human knowledge, which proves to be threadbare and insufficient. The soul journey's final stages are marked by the gentle release of personal resources, surrendering reliance on strength, wisdom, and learning. In the end, Hildegard seems to suggest, just give me Jesus. Coming from this learned abbess, later to be named a doctor of the church, Hildegard's willingness to relinquish all acquired authority is remarkable.

And, of course, Thomas of Aquinas, another church doctor possibly unsurpassed in learning and understanding, concludes his soul journey at the same spot. Aquinas refused to finish his masterpiece, the many-volumed *Summa Theologica* that was his life's work, dismissing it abruptly as straw compared with what he mystically experienced one hour at Eucharist. When the greatest teachers of the church prefer "just Jesus" to any of their considerable worldly advantages, it has to give the rest of us pause.

Forty years ago, as a young woman pursuing a theology degree, I believed that a career in the church came with precisely this job description: I was called to give people Jesus, full stop. Back then I imagined the life of a catechist rather like the service of a

eucharistic minister passing out communion—only under the form of helpful stories and bountiful information rather than bread and wine. I figured a life of teaching ought to get the job done, so I delivered as much instruction as possible in parish classes, published articles and books, Lenten missions, conference talks, and retreats. For decades, I was quite sure that knowledge is power and learning is foundational. Good information seemed a form of secular salvation. I also imagined everyone was as ignited by the world of ideas as I was. What could be more wonderful than gaining a new insight that opens wide the doors of the mind and heart? I don't disbelieve any of those things today. Yet in deep humility, I've come to understand that information is never going to be enough. Nor is knowledge, nor even the finest catechesis. The key to the enterprise of faith is evangelization: the illumination that comes when the heart is burst open by the light of Christ. And evangelization is not something one can ever acquire from a scripture column. This is a profoundly regretful realization. Having written more than 300 such columns for this magazine and some five million words in the past 30 years, I sincerely wish it were not so. I cannot give anyone Jesus. He's not mine to give.

Thank God, Jesus gives himself away, and very generously. As Paul lyrically declared to the Philippians, Jesus empties himself upon the world, to the point of death on a cross. All we have to do is receive him.

This doesn't mean merely standing in the communion line and putting out our hands. It doesn't require consuming shelves full of spiritual literature and reading every document composed by popes. Nor is it a matter of practicing regular bouts of *lectio divina*, that much-taught method of savoring scripture slowly until it sinks into our souls and unlocks its treasures. These are good habits, precious habits, which can be of great benefit to us. But if receiving Jesus were as simple as embracing these time-honored Catholic practices, we'd be neck deep in living saints right now. Nor is the Protestant method of repeating five sentences of salvation culled from Romans sufficient to "get" Jesus.

There is no incantation and no ritual that obliges Jesus to come claim us. We have to claim him, reaching out with both hands. That will involve emptying those hands first. Not so simple in a consumer society. As Jesus once told an eager young man who'd meticulously kept all the religious laws since childhood, it's necessary to relinquish our accumulated worldly treasure and even our proud spiritual accomplishments to find space for what Jesus has to offer.

Whenever I meet holy people—folks who emanate the radiant love and compassion that gives them away as genuine Jesus people—I ask them how they got that way. The reply always comes in the form of a story. Not a story about scripture or sacraments or special studies, though it sometimes eventually includes those things. Instead, holy people share an episode, an encounter, a relationship, that fixed their lives on an inspired course. It's not unlike hearing Paul's recollection of meeting the Lord on the Damascus road, a story Paul relates repeatedly because it empowers and informs the rest of his life. The bottom line is, the holy folk all get Jesus. And once they get him, whatever else may be needed is supplied, and whatever may be an obstacle is removed.

So let me tell a story. I was baptized at 12 days old, but I got Jesus at age 16. I was alone in a public courtyard, making one of a series of tedious deals with God about my future, as a teenager might do. There came no vision, no words, commands, or instructions. I felt suddenly and completely captured within a waterfall of grace, mesmerizing and calming. I can't say I saw radiant light so much as felt bathed in the reality of it. I didn't know what to do next precisely, but I felt confident I would be led and was entirely at peace. That was it. It turned out to be enough.

No two such stories are alike, but if you've had one, you recognize the sensation. It's what Thomas Merton said about this Louisville illumination: "It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world. . . . And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun." Merton experienced the "immense joy" of being a "member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate." Jesus is God-made-flesh, so we "get" Jesus when we encounter God-in-us.

This is all I meant to say, five million words into a career in catechetics. Ask. Seek. Stay open. Get Jesus. The rest will follow.

This article also appears in the September 2026 issue of U.S. Catholi (Vol. 91, No. 9, pages 46-48). [Click here to subscribe to the magazine.](#)