

STUDIES

IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS

PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS
WITH JESUS CHRIST

E. EDWARD KINERK, S.J.

48/3 AUTUMN 2016

THE SEMINAR ON JESUIT SPIRITUALITY

STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS is a publication of the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States.

The Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality is composed of Jesuits appointed from their provinces. The seminar identifies and studies topics pertaining to the spiritual doctrine and practice of Jesuits, especially US and Canadian Jesuits, and gathers current scholarly studies pertaining to the history and ministries of Jesuits throughout the world. It then disseminates the results through this journal.

The subjects treated in STUDIES may be of interest also to Jesuits of other regions and to other religious, clergy, and laity. All who find this journal helpful are welcome to access previous issues at: ejournals@bc.edu/jesuits.

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**PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS
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a word from the editor . . .

Our readers sometimes ask about the target audience of *STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS*. Is it the Jesuit Assistancy of Canada and the United States, the worldwide Society of Jesus, or the entire “Ignatian family” of colleagues, friends, students, and devotees of the Pilgrim?

In 1969, Fr. George Ganss (1905–2000), the co-founder of *STUDIES*, identified the US Assistancy as the specific focus. That remains true today, although the assistancy now includes Canadian companions. By extension, however, the Seminar in Jesuit Spirituality desires to serve the ongoing education and edification of Jesuits around the world and of our colleagues and friends.

Some might wonder about the “by extension” clause. Why not make the Ignatian family the principal target and then invite lay colleagues to submit essays and join the seminar? Or if the seminar insists on directing its essays specifically to Jesuits, then at least it could solicit more submissions from companions around the world.

Yet what seems like a narrow focus is not necessarily so. The seminar occasionally receives submissions with titles such as “Parallels between the Jesuit Constitutions and the Danish Constitutional Monarchy,” or “Jesuit Pedagogy in Australian Public Schools.” They might be excellent essays in themselves, but the seminar can reasonably expect that few Jesuits in the US and Canada will want to read them. And so, by specifying these latter constituencies as its primary audience, the seminar has reasonable justification for respectfully declining such submissions.

On the other hand, essays directed to US and Canadian Jesuits often have obvious relevance for Jesuits and friends in general. The old adage among archers and riflemen, “Aim small, miss small,” applies here: if one writes for a discrete audience, then one probably will end up speaking to others in the vicinity. But if one writes for a broad audience, vaguely perceived and ill-defined, then one might fail to connect with readers altogether.

Another consideration is that numerous resources already exist for the formation of colleagues. Teachers can avail themselves of Marquette University's *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education* and Regis University's *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*. More broadly, followers of Ignatius have *America*, *The Tablet*, and *The Jesuit Post*. Excellent websites, such as those maintained by Xavier University and Loyola Press, provide points on Ignatian spirituality and prayer. However, *STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS* is the only English-language monograph series aimed specifically at Jesuits. Nowhere else can one find Jesuits' unique interests treated at length and in a manner accessible to academics and non-academics alike.

For these reasons, the seminar presupposes that US and Canadian Jesuits will write the majority of essays. However, the seminar does accept submissions from other Jesuits and from lay colleagues and friends, provided the content speaks as much or more to US and Canadian Jesuits as to a wider audience. For instance, the seminar might publish a lay colleague's submission entitled "What Every Jesuit Needs to Know about Working with Laity," but probably would not publish one entitled "What Every Layperson Needs to Know about Working with Jesuits."

In the present issue, "Personal Encounters with Jesus Christ," Fr. E. Edward Kinerk (UCS) reflects on how to cultivate, by means of principles found within the *Spiritual Exercises*, a more intimate relationship with Jesus. His essay exemplifies well how a piece addressed to Jesuits can speak to many others.

Fr. Kinerk is no newcomer to *STUDIES*. An earlier article, "Eliciting Great Desires: Their Place in the Spirituality of the Society of Jesus" (Nov. 1984) has become something of a classic. Jesuit formators from around the US tell me that they continue to use it for their men, and one professor recently urged me to reprint it. Fr. Kinerk followed with "When Jesuits Pray: A Perspective on the Prayer of Apostolic Persons" (Nov. 1985).

With Fr. Kinerk's permission, I share here that his initial draft bore the title "A Personal Relationship with Jesus Christ." My breath hitched slightly when I read those words. The phrase has long been a battle cry

for evangelical Christians in their efforts to convince Catholics of that which we supposedly do not have. I was a freshman at the University of Missouri in 1987, where naïve, relatively uncatechized Catholics like myself were low-hanging fruit for organized Protestant groups such as the Navigators. “Is it really possible that I don’t know Jesus?” I asked myself more than once. “Has my upbringing been a lie?”

The question dogged me in a different way in the early years of my Jesuit formation. A thought recurred in prayer: “How do I know that what I love is Jesus himself, rather than the idea of Jesus?” On the one hand, it felt like a false distinction—a distraction from the enemy intended to rattle me. On the other hand, Jesus himself warned that one can say “Lord, Lord,” without really knowing him (Matt 7:21). And, as Kierkegaard was fond of noting, one can study theology for intellectual gratification without being a person of prayer.

Years later, during theology studies, I was surprised—and, I must admit, a little relieved—to learn that Christians did not always equate a personal relationship with Jesus with authentic faith. In the ancient church, Christians were so convinced of the presence of the risen Christ in the faith-community that to have a relationship with the church *was* to have a relationship with Christ. A saying popular among them, “The world was created for the sake of the church,” profoundly underscores that conviction and makes little sense without it.¹

In the *Contemplatio*, Ignatius describes our love for Jesus—and his love for us—as a “mutual communication” in which each side shares with the other both who they are and what they have. I suggest that this is where Fr. Kinerk’s essay shines. In essence, he walks us through an Ignatian meditation on this most intimate image. Our memory, intellect, and will each has its say within these pages.

We might have another classic.

Barton T. Geger, SJ
Editor

¹ *Shepherd of Hermas*, Vision 2, 4, 1.

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Fr. E. Edward Kinerk (ucs) joined the Missouri Province in 1966 and was ordained in 1972. Three years later he earned a doctorate in spiritual theology from the Gregorian University in Rome with a dissertation on C. S. Lewis. He has served as novice master, formation director, and provincial, and as president of Rockhurst University in Kansas City. He currently directs Sacred Heart Retreat House in Sedalia, Colorado.

Personal Encounters with Jesus Christ

Short, seemingly casual conversations between friends or lovers in fact contain nuanced, habitual expressions of intimacy, self-revelation, self-donation, vulnerability, reassurance, and promise. Contemplation upon these truths of everyday experience, and the application of them to prayer, can enrich profoundly one's sense of being in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

I. Introduction

Several years ago, I was asked to give a talk on spirituality to a group of newly-baptized adults. I agreed and drove about fifty miles down to the parish that had invited me. Unfortunately, there was snow that day, and when I arrived I was informed that the talk had been cancelled. They had tried to reach me but I had already left the retreat house and did not have my cell phone with me. The only people there were the staff who worked with the group. We chatted amiably for a few minutes before one of them asked if I would share with them the gist of what I had prepared. I agreed, and after about five minutes of running through my outline, one of them commented, in a slightly disparaging way, "Oh, that's that relationship with Christ stuff." I was taken off guard, especially when no one else seemed to take issue with her remark, but I brushed it off by saying, "Oh well, what can you expect from a Jesuit?"

It was not a huge issue at the time, but the remark stuck with me, and I began to realize that many Catholics often seem not to think in terms of a relationship with Christ. Certainly, many or most—if not all—Jesuits find it hard not to have that relationship in mind whenever they talk about their own spiritual lives and whenever they talk to others about theirs. Yet I found it hard to imagine that a relationship with Christ ought not to be in some way a conscious factor in the life of every Christian.

Then Pope Francis came into the full life of the Church. His first major communication to us was his wonderful apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, “The Joy of the Gospel.” In some ways, that document is quite easy to summarize. The very first sentence reads, “the joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.”¹ Then, in the eighth paragraph, he writes, “for if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?”²

In short, we should know the love and joy of Christ and share it with others! Just to make sure that everyone gets the message—and finds the same joy that Pope Francis clearly finds—he writes in the third paragraph:

I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord.³

Here, the pope exhorts all Christians to “a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ . . . unfailingly each day.” Now, I have little doubt that every Jesuit enjoys and values a relationship with Christ. It would be impossible to make the Spiritual Exercises without coming to know him better and without sharing ourselves with him, at the very least

¹ *Evangelii gaudium*, 1.

² *Evangelii gaudium*, 8.

³ *Evangelii gaudium*, 3.

in the colloquies. Furthermore, we boldly call ourselves *companions of Jesus*. In this essay, I would like to propose a way of deepening that relationship by putting the pope's mandate to encounter Christ daily into dialogue with the precept of Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556) to “find God in all things.” I want to offer some thoughts on encountering Christ frequently in the midst of a busy apostolic life, and my hope is that this can benefit any Christian who, like most of us, is caught up in the noise and hustle of our contemporary world.

Ignatius, himself a mystic, valued prayer; but he was careful not to allow lengthy prayer to become either the Jesuit's vocation, or even the only way in which a Jesuit should seek the Lord. On this point, he noted that, for a Jesuit with interior freedom, “a quarter of an hour suffices to unite [that Jesuit] with God in prayer.”⁴ Then, in the *Constitutions*, Ignatius wrote that scholastics should take one hour daily for two examens, the Office of Our Lady, and any other prayers to fill out the time.⁵ As for finding God in all things, he once asked a Jesuit, who told him that he found God primarily in solitude and by praying privately, “What do you mean? Do you draw no profit from helping your neighbor? For this is our practice.”⁶

In this sense, Ignatius prayed formally, but also found God many times in the midst of a busy day, including when helping his neighbor. Jesuit biographer Pedro de Ribadeneira (1527–1611), describing the founder's practice, wrote:

We frequently saw him taking the occasion of little things to lift his mind to God. . . . From seeing a plant, foliage, a leaf, a flower, any fruit, from the consideration of a little worm or any other animal, he raised himself above the heavens and penetrated the deepest thoughts. . . . And he desired that all in the Society accustom themselves always to find the presence of God in everything and that they learn to raise their hearts not

⁴ Luís Gonçalves da Câmara, *Memoriale*, n. 196, in *Fontes narrativi de S. Ignatio de Loyola et de Societatis Jesus initiis* (hereafter FN), 4 vols. (Rome, 1943-65), I, 644. My translation.

⁵ Cons. 342.

⁶ Gregorius Rosephius, FN, III, 515. My translation.

only in private prayer but also in all of their occupations, carrying them out and offering them in such a way that they would feel no less devotion in action than in meditation.⁷

Undoubtedly, finding God in all things has a direct connection to building our relationship with Christ.

In the paragraphs below, I frame Ignatius's desire using the language of relationships and encounters. I begin by underscoring some important ingredients of human encounters and applying them to our encounters with Christ. Then I suggest that, just as Ignatius used the smallest things and the smallest amounts of time to lift his mind to God, we, too, can take a few moments here and there throughout our busy day to encounter the Lord and thereby enhance our relationship with him. In doing so we can grow in an abiding sense of his loving presence, which in turn might bring an ever deeper experience of that joy about which Pope Francis speaks and that he so wonderfully exhibits in his own person.

II. What Is a Relationship with Christ?

There are many ways to speak of a relationship with Christ. He is our creator, so we are related to him. He is one of us, so we are related to him. He is our redeemer, so we are related to him. In this article, however, I want to specify the term *relationship*, so that when I speak of a relationship with Christ I speak of a personal relationship. By *personal relationship* I mean a relationship between persons in which there is a mutual sharing of personal concerns and interests. In this way, for example, a business relationship shares concerns and interests but is not necessarily personal, since the concerns and interests might not be personal. On the other hand, two friends share what is significant to them personally and therefore have a personal relationship. Throughout this article, when I use the term *relationship*, I refer to a personal relationship.

⁷ Pedro Ribadeneira, *Vita Ignatii Loyola*, in *FN*, IV, 743. My translation.

Hopefully, most Christians are at least dimly aware that we have to some degree a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The question, then, becomes one of how to maintain and enhance it. Furthermore, for most people, it is a question of maintaining and enhancing that relationship in the midst of the busy world in which we live and work. And so, because a very important dimension of any relationship is the encounters we enjoy with one other, this article focuses on what it means to enhance our relationship with Christ through frequent encounters with him. This is precisely what Pope Francis has encouraged us to do in *Evangelii gaudium*, and Francis also quotes his predecessor, Benedict, regarding the importance of these encounters: “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”⁸

I love you takes about one second to say, but those few words can give enormous significance to a very brief encounter.

III. Elements of an Encounter with Christ

One of the most important components in building a personal relationship is the time we spend with the other person—that is, personal encounters. Granted, the impact of any encounter does not always depend on the amount of time we spend together. *I love you* takes about one second to say, but those few words can give enormous significance to a very brief encounter. I suggest that we should increase the number of encounters we have with Christ daily; but I do not mean that we add extra prayer periods to our day. I am not even going to call these encounters *prayer*, both because they do not replace whatever practice of daily prayer we already have, and because, as I discuss later, our daily prayer is important for these additional encounters. Furthermore, since these additional encounters do not take a great deal

⁸ *Evangelii gaudium*, 3; *Deus caritas est* (December 25, 2005), n. 1: AAS 98 (2006), 217, in *Evangelii gaudium*, 7.

of time—often only a matter of seconds, as with Ignatius’s finding God in all things—we can add a good number of them to our day without a great deal of effort.

To illustrate, let us look at a typical human encounter. Consider the image of two good friends getting together for lunch. I focus on three things: connection, shared meaning, and words of promise.

George and Tom are lifelong friends and have decided to meet for lunch at a nice Italian restaurant. They pull in to the parking lot at the same time, see each other’s cars, and walk toward each other. As they get within verbal range, the first words out of George’s mouth are, *Tom, the World Series is next week; do you think that we have a chance with our star pitcher hurt?* And then George goes on about the chances of his favorite team. But while Tom might well be a fan of the same team and equally concerned about the World Series, he is caught a bit off guard at that moment. Instead of commenting on the Series, Tom blurts out, *George, Hi! How’s it going? Good to see you!* And he might have expected George to greet him in a similar fashion.

So, why is this important? It is almost a formula that George and Tom would be mouthing toward one another: *Hi, George/Tom—good to see you!* Why can they not just begin by talking about the World Series or anything else that is on their minds? Although we probably do not think about it directly, the reason is simple: George and Tom have not established a connection with each other until they go through some kind of greeting ritual. Tom’s *Hi, good to see you*, and George’s similar response are much more than a simple formula. They are telling each other, *I am aware of you; we are in each other’s space and that is good*. The key word here is *awareness*: Tom is telling George that he is aware of him, and George is telling Tom the same thing. They are now in each other’s space, and they are both aware of it. They are now connected. This is extremely important, and I apply it later to encounters with Christ.

George and Tom are now connected. They proceed in to the restaurant, talk about their favorite baseball team, their families, work, and all kinds of things. Somewhere in that conversation emerge things that are deeply important to them. These could be comforting thoughts or events, or they could be troubling or even tragic; but if George and Tom

are really good friends, then they are going to share what is really important to each of them. Maybe George's wife was diagnosed with cancer or Tom's eldest son is about to receive a doctorate. It could be good or bad; but George and Tom in all likelihood touch on some matters that are personally meaningful to them, and each takes very seriously what the other says.

Let us now move now to the end of the lunch. George looks at his watch and says, *Oh my gosh, I need to pick up my grandson at the airport. I'm going to have to leave pretty soon.* At that point, they do not both jump up and leave right away: they take their leave. They finish up whatever they were talking about, pay the bill, and walk out toward the closest car, where they say goodbye. Sometime before actually saying goodbye, Tom says, *George, I am really sorry to hear about your wife's cancer; I'll be praying for you both.* And George might say to Tom, *Congratulations to your son; I know it means a lot to you to see what he has accomplished.* We all do this in similar situations. We don't even think about it, but at the end of a good luncheon conversation when we are about to part, we almost always bring up something from the conversation and highlight it again. Usually, what we bring up comes from the more meaningful parts of the conversation. But why do we do it? For one thing, it is a way of saying *I really listened to you; we were connected.* On the other hand, it is a promise for the future: *We will continue this conversation; our connection has a future.*

There are, of course, significant differences between a relationship with a close friend and our relationship with Christ. Christ is, after all, God; and he does not encounter us in the same physical way in which a friend encounters us. That being said, there are nonetheless some important parallels, since while Christ is also God we remain only human and must relate to others, including Christ, as humans. In developing a style for these short encounters with Christ throughout our day, we can focus on the three related themes of connecting, sharing meaning, and words of promise.

A. Connecting

It is important in our encounters with Christ that we consciously connect with him. Although he is always present and aware of us, we

need to do our part in order for the connection to take place, and we do it in the same way that George and Tom established their connection. We may not want to use similar words—*Hi, Christ, how's it going?*—but we do need to make ourselves aware that Christ is present and that he is aware of us. This is similar to putting ourselves into the presence of God, but there is an important difference: namely, that I make myself aware not just that Christ is present but that *Christ is aware of me*. Agreed, Christ is always present everywhere, and he is aware of every-

I should imagine myself as having Christ's undivided attention, which I can do because Christ's attention is infinite.

one and everything. But I need to make myself explicitly aware of this when I connect with him. In fact, I should imagine myself as having Christ's undivided attention, which I can do because

Christ's attention is infinite. And I need not necessarily use words to do so. One simple way involves using the word of Jesus to Mary of Magdala after the Resurrection, when she thought that Jesus was the gardener. He said, lovingly, "Mary" (John 20:16). Likewise, we can imagine Jesus speaking our name lovingly. In doing this I am aware of him; and I am aware that he is aware of me.

But how long should this take? A few seconds, not much more. When Tom and George greet each other, they don't keep repeating it until they get it right. They just do it and move on. On the other hand, after I do it with Christ, I might find that I want to abide in that awareness for a while or even for quite a while, if circumstances allow. And when should I do it? Anytime I pray—or really, anytime I want to encounter him—whether it's only for a few seconds or, as during my regular prayer, for a much longer time. I personally have found that using this brief connection at the beginning of regular prayer as well as in the more frequent, brief encounters brings a lingering notion of his presence even when my attention is elsewhere.

Ignatius does something similar with the Preparatory Prayer in the *Spiritual Exercises*.⁹ By directly addressing God at the very begin-

⁹ *SpEx* 46. Ignatius asks the retreatant to begin each meditation or contemplation with a Preparatory Prayer in which the retreatant is to ask "God our Lord for grace that

ning of our prayer, we are, in effect, connecting with God by making ourselves aware both of God and of his awareness of us. The difference is that, in the *Exercises*, Ignatius gives a particular nuance to that awareness by having us ask that everything be oriented to God in a movement of spiritual freedom. In contrast, in the frequent encounters that I am discussing here, the emphasis falls first on the awareness itself: *I make myself aware that he is aware of me*. Particular nuances, such as spiritual freedom, might then flow from that awareness during the encounter and even receive concrete expression in the words of promise at the end of the encounter.

B. Sharing Personal Meaning

In our relationship with Christ, we share our personal meaning with him and he shares his with us. Because our own meaning involves whatever is important to us at any given time, we do not need to spend a great deal of time discussing it here. Still, it is worth noting that the clear intention of the Spiritual Exercises is to help us know what we really want as opposed to what we might think that we want.¹⁰ In terms of our relationship with Christ, this means that sometimes being in his presence brings the interior freedom to let go of lesser concerns and to take on deeper ones. In other words, I might well leave even a short encounter with Christ having a very different perspective on what is personally meaningful to me.

On the other hand, we can ask what is personally meaningful to Christ. Ignatius addresses this same point in the *Exercises*. In the Third Prelude and throughout the Second Week, he encourages the retreatant to ask for “an intimate knowledge of our Lord, who has become human for me, that I may love him more and follow him more closely.”¹¹ Indeed, it is impossible to have a significant relationship with someone without coming to know and appreciate that person more and to understand what that person considers meaningful. The same holds true

all my intentions, actions, and operations may be directed purely to the praise and service of his Divine Majesty.”

¹⁰ *SpEx* 1.

¹¹ *SpEx* 104.

for our relationship with Christ. The closer we come to him, the more we appreciate who he is and what he has done for us, and the more we want to be involved with him.

The following three subsections discuss Christ's personal meaning according to three themes: (1) trusting that Christ loves me, (2) learning Christ and appreciating his ways, and (3) putting on the mind of Christ.

1. Confidence in Being Loved by Christ

It may seem strange at first to think of my very understanding that I am deeply loved by Christ as itself personally meaningful to him. On the other hand, if Christ has given his life for each of us, then he probably would want us to know and appreciate how much he loves us. But believing that this is true and really internalizing it are quite different.

After many years of giving spiritual direction, listening to the stories of various people, including Jesuits, and doing retreat work, I have no doubt that truly trusting that we are loved by God is difficult for us all. I remember about six years ago I was praying on a swing on the grounds of the retreat house where I work. Because I am a consummate administrator, my prayer was constantly being distracted by things I needed to do. Finally, when the half hour was finished, I used my cell phone to call my office in order to leave myself a to-do list. Let me confess here that I always find it strange to call myself on the phone. When my answering machine responded, I gave the usual awkward, "Uh, it's me," then left my list of three things (it is always three). Then came the hard part. As often as I have done this, it always seems rude to just hang up without saying *goodbye*, but why would I say goodbye to myself? In any case, this time—and it still sends a shiver down my spine to recall it—I said, by way of goodbye, "And don't forget that Christ loves you." Then, startled, I hung up.

The next morning, I went to my office and the phone was lit, signaling a voice message. Actually, there were several messages. I listened attentively and took notes on the first couple. Then this strange voice—I never recognize my own voice on a recording—came on. For a micro-second I thought, *Who is this rude person?* But I knew quickly enough that it was me. I listened to the message from the day before and took

notes. However, when I had finished with the list, I remembered the parting words that I had left the day before and, at that point, I almost deleted the message. Fortunately, something restrained me, and I forced myself to listen to myself telling myself that Christ loves me. I ended up leaving that message on the phone for several months; and, on one or two occasions, I forced myself to listen to the message again. Each time I listened to it, I felt uncomfortable; but I found it overpowering to consider that although I had spent my life reassuring people that God loved them, I still had difficulty believing it to be true for me.

Why do I find it so difficult to believe this? I cannot say for certain, but I think it has a lot to do with the fact that we cannot possibly earn or deserve God's love. It is pure gift and therefore beyond our control. Surely, no one's love is ever fully earned or deserved, and neither do we control our being loved by others. However, that probably does not bother us as much. After all, other human beings are not God, and yet we still love them. But there may be another reason, which I probably do not want to admit fully, even to myself: love can be frightening, and infinite love can be very frightening. Why? Because love always demands a response. If someone approaches me and says, *I am madly in love with you, and I want you*, I cannot just nod my head, comment on the weather and walk away. I have to respond, and I have to respond in such a way that either I reject that person's offer of love—*I'm sorry, but I'm not interested*—or I do something that would encourage the pursuit of a relationship. Christ's love is no different, except that the enormity of his love calls for an ever stronger response on my part: either fierce resistance or deep surrender. Perhaps in order to keep from resisting while still feeling fearful of a deep surrender, I prefer to keep my awareness of that love somewhat at a distance.

In this regard, a growing sense or even concrete experience of Christ's constant loving presence throughout the day cannot help but lead to both a growing confidence that we are loved, and a lessened fear of that love. I remember once not long ago when I called to mind his presence and somehow had the thought, *Am I deceiving myself? Why would you want to be with me?* At that point, the thought came back, with a tinge of humor linked to it: *Oh for heaven's sake, Ed, I gave my life for you! How can you think I don't want to be with you?*

To summarize: the more time we spend with the lover, the more we are assured that we are loved; and the more we want to experience that love. Furthermore, it is important that whenever we make ourselves aware of his presence, we make ourselves aware that he is *lovingly* aware of us. Finally, we should never let experiences of shame or guilt keep us from these encounters; indeed, that is when we need them the most.

2. Learning Christ and Appreciating His Ways

When we develop a deep relationship with another person, we come to know more and more about that person and about that person's ways. The same holds true in our relationship with Christ. Naturally, we don't need to worry about Christ getting to know us. He does know us, although it can sometimes be helpful for us to have the experience of consciously sharing ourselves with him. Here, I want to offer a few thoughts on how we can get to know him, for just as a husband and wife bring a vast history to each meeting with one another, so, too, do we bring a history and knowledge of Christ into every new encounter. In what follows, I explore three ways by which we come to know Christ and that continue to renew and nourish our knowledge of him throughout our lives: the Christian community, Scripture, and personal experience.

a. The Christian Community

The Christian community, understood as the people of God, is the place where our knowledge of Christ begins, receives nourishment, and is confirmed. It would be impossible in this short article to elaborate in detail how the Christian community shapes our knowledge of Christ, but we can realize some basic elements. First, most of us learned about Christ from others before we learned about him from reading Scripture and from personal experience. Even the experience of Christ that we had at an early age was shaped and nurtured by others, especially family. As we grow in our knowledge of Christ, fellow Christians continue to support and challenge that knowledge. We need only think of the Christians whose stories we read in the Acts of the Apostles. St. Paul and others experienced Christ's Spirit in themselves but then needed to seek out the community to give shape and meaning to that experience.

Developing this point, note that there are any number of ways by which we receive help from the Christian community. The most obvious is through participation in the activities of the church, particularly the celebration of the Eucharist. For Jesuits, I would single out three other ways: sharing our faith with others—including our brother Jesuits—spiritual reading, and ministry. In the latter, we learn Christ through the experience of those whom we serve, especially the poor.

b. Scripture

In addition to coming to Christ through the community, we also encounter him through Scripture. I have had the privilege of directing a number of people through the full Spiritual Exercises. Among my directees I remember two who were Bible scholars and taught in universities. It goes without saying that their professional background was a great gift when it came to using Scripture during the retreat. I, too, profited from their expertise. On the other hand, this knowledge was also at times a distraction, which they recognized as such in that they recognized their difficulty in setting aside analysis of a given Bible passage so as to enter into it themselves. Luke Timothy Johnson writes about this in *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel*.¹² One of his main points is captured in the title itself: our object is not to learn about Jesus, but rather to learn Jesus himself. Granted, a background in Scripture is important for us as Jesuits and can help any Christian to know the Lord. But the intent of the Exercises in general, and of a relationship with Christ in particular, is not only to know about the risen Lord, but also to know the risen Lord himself.

Let me offer a couple of thoughts about getting to know Jesus with the help of Scripture, especially the gospels. Imagine that you are the father of a son who has just returned from a semester abroad. You were in regular contact with him while he was away, and you know that it was a life-changing experience for him. One day, several weeks after his return, you and he are alone in the house, and he asks if you would like to hear more about his time abroad. You agree, and for the next few

¹² Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999).

hours he recounts significant events and describes their lasting effect on him. While he is relating his story, you find a part of you overseas with him in your imagination, going through the events that he is describing, while another part of you is actually receiving, in real time, the transformation that has taken place in your son. In short, you are learning him and appreciating him anew.

From this perspective, consider the gospels as the story of the risen Jesus. This is how we come to know a great deal about that loving presence in our lives. By now, the Scriptures are pretty familiar for most of us. We have studied them, we have heard them read at Mass for years, and we have preached and taught them. But because they are so familiar, we need to focus on them again—perhaps over and over again—in order to learn Jesus more. One way to do this, which might give a new perspective and a deeper meaning of the Scripture, is to read them out loud but without an audience. Reading Scripture aloud makes us put more into the words in order to give the proper tone and emphasis, which in turn provides more meaning to us in the very act of reading. Furthermore, to get an even more intimate experience of Jesus from Scripture, try reading the gospels, whether aloud or silently, in the first person singular; in other words, read them as if you were Jesus telling you his own story. And why not? After all, the risen Jesus is in you. Keep in mind too that Scripture is his divinely inspired story, and we believe that his word, whether historically accurate in the details, can lead us to the truth of who he is and what he is like.

In many ways, Christ's entire life was an attempt to share with us what was important to him and to the Trinity. And so when we say that Scripture is inspired, we are saying that God wants us to know these things. He wants us to know who Christ was and is, and what was and is important to him. To summarize: in my encounters with Christ—in my prayer, in my reflection on Scripture, and in my daily life—I am trying to learn what is important to him right now so that I can know him better, love him more completely, and make his concerns my own.

c. Personal Experience

Experience is very important but it is, of course, hard to describe, as it is different for everyone. Personal experience—our own story—is

both particular and in a sense revelatory, since every relationship, including a relationship with Christ, is unique.

When directing a retreat, especially if the full Exercises, directors often ask retreatants to tell their stories. Directors are not interested in names, dates, and social security numbers, but want to know their retreatants' spiritual stories—the stories of their relationship with and experience of God. While knowing their stories may help the directors, the real audience is the individual storyteller himself or herself. In this way, our full relationship with Christ is not a single event or a uniform experience but rather a series of events and experiences that both connect together and bring about changes. In my case, my relationship with Christ has changed over the decades—thank goodness!—but there is continuity as well.

I often ask retreatants what is their first memory of God and themselves. I do this because I remember a simple but profound experience of Christ when I was about seven years old. I had been playing with some friends, having a good time, and on the way home I stopped in the neighbors' yard to swing in their swing. I remember feeling that God was pleased that I had had such a good time. At the time, I didn't make much more of this awareness other than to note that it was a nice experience. But the very fact that I still remember it makes it important. In retrospect, I understand more deeply the significance of that experience—specifically, I see how that episode, as an experience of God's awareness and love, both strengthens and is pruned by subsequent experiences or impressions of Christ in my life.

Learning Christ through the Christian community, through Scripture, and through personal experience is most important for our ongoing relationship with Christ. In a similar way, the relationship of a couple who has been married for a number of years has a history that is still developing, but that history also colors everything that happens. For instance, one partner sometimes knows what the other is thinking before the other does. That history—that knowledge—in a relationship is very important. So, too, our knowledge of Christ—of what he is like—can add tremendous meaning to the brief encounters that we have throughout our day. A few moments of awareness of him and of his awareness of us can contain volumes of unspoken communication.

Sometimes, my simple awareness of walking with him down the corridor changes everything I go on to do. In this sense, while there has been no verbal communication, there doesn't need to be. He is perfect love, and he demonstrates what that means. That's all that is necessary.

3. Putting on the Mind of Christ

From time to time, I run into older couples who appear to have the same facial features. On closer inspection, I often find that they don't really have the same features; but I think they know each other so well and are together so much that they adopt the same physical responses and facial expressions, and that this makes them look alike. It is not surprising that after many years of both struggle and happiness, but above all commitment and love, the partners have begun to put on each other's minds. Finally, one knows the other so well that he or she not only anticipates the spouse's desire but also may even think it as his or her desire.

Likewise, it is no surprise that as our relationship with Christ develops we begin to put on the mind of Christ. This is St. Paul's terminology in the wonderful hymn in the second chapter of Philippians (2:5).¹³

¹³ In its entirety, the hymn (Phil 2:5–11) reads as follows:

Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in the form of God,
did not count equality with God
something to be grasped.

But he emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
becoming as human beings are;
and being in every way like a human being,
he was humbler yet,
even to accepting death, death on a cross.

And for this God raised him high,
and gave him the name
which is above all other names;

so that *all beings*
in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld,

As we get to know Christ, we know better what he wants and how he responds. If we are drawn into that relationship with him, then like that couple we want to see things as he sees them and respond as he responds.

Obviously, we will not do this perfectly until the fullness of the kingdom; but we frequently say a prayer that contains a good summary of the mind of Christ. In that prayer we ask to want the same things that Christ wants. That prayer is the Our Father. Jesus was asked to teach us how to pray, and what he did was to give us a list of things to pray for. *Hallowed be thy name*: may we want only the true God, and not lesser gods like money and power. *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done*: may we love you and one another, which is what the Kingdom is all about. *Give us today our daily bread*: notice that it is “us” and not me; and so we ask that the goods of this earth be provided to all. *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*: again, we are asking for the fullness of the kingdom, where all are reconciled with one another and with God. And finally, *lead us not into temptation*: let us not be misled by lesser desires.

The simplest yet most profound description of putting on the mind of Christ are the following verses of Paul’s hymn: “[Christ,] being in the form of God, did not count equality with God, something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are” (Phil 2:6–7). The hymn goes on to describe Christ’s further emptying of self on a cross, but concludes with his being filled again with his divinity.

This emptying and eventual being filled is perhaps the best way to describe the mind of Christ. It should not be surprising, then, that the more frequent our encounters with the Risen Lord, the deeper we

should bend the knee at the name of Jesus

and that *every tongue should acknowledge*
Jesus Christ as Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Scripture quotations here and elsewhere in this article come from the New Jerusalem Bible.

go in connecting with him and learning his ways, and the more we find the invitation and grace to let go of our own egos. In other words, as I connect more with him, I might find that, for example, as I imagine him beside me while I walk down the corridor to give a presentation, those words that compete with the Word for my attention are whittled away. Or perhaps, as I am driving along the highway and take a moment to become aware of his presence and his awareness of me, I make an effort to make space so that the car coming up on my right can enter my lane ahead of me. Or maybe, as I am preparing a homily, I worry less about giving the best homily ever heard and concentrate more on what Jesus, my alter-ego, wants his people to hear.

Ignatius ends the *Spiritual Exercises* with the Contemplation to Attain Divine Love. The central feature of the Contemplation is the Suscipe, which begins, *Take, Lord, and receive*.¹⁴ This prayer, which comes after the retreatant has pondered all the gifts that he or she has received from God, is an expression both of emptying—*Take, Lord, and receive*—and of being filled—*give me only your love and your grace*.

Christ communicates what is personally important to him by letting us know how much he loves us, by sharing what is on his mind—what he cares about—and by inviting us to put on his mind, and thus to think and feel like him. Although the short encounters treated here do not allow time for reading Scripture or reflecting on what we learn about Christ through the Christian community or even through personal experience, note that we bring an already-formed sense of Christ into these experiences—just as good friends bring the history of their relationship into each new encounter with one another. The encounter itself then builds on the past, sometimes utilizing it to make the encounter more meaningful and sometimes giving richer meaning to the history itself.

C. Words of Promise

At the end of their luncheon, George and Tom made an implicit promise to take seriously what each had shared and to continue their

¹⁴ *SpEx* 234.

friendship. Now suppose that, a few days after their luncheon, they run into each other at noon, both rushing in opposite directions on a busy downtown sidewalk. Surprised, George sees Tom coming toward him and calls out, *Tom!*—who, also surprised, calls back, *George!* Immediately Tom says to George, “I’ve been praying for your wife—how is she?” “Surgery next week.” “I’ll keep praying.” “Thanks, and good luck to your son getting a teaching position.” “Take care.” “I’ll give you a call.” This brief encounter has all the elements of a brief encounter with Christ. First, there is the quick recognition and making themselves aware of one other. Then, there is the focus on the personal meaning that each had brought up at the luncheon. Next, there is a promise for the future, both to continue to take that meaning seriously and to connect again with each other.

Recall here that Christ has promised to be with us always, and that whenever we encounter him, that promise is both fulfilled and renewed.

Recall here that Christ has promised to be with us always, and that whenever we encounter him, that promise is both fulfilled and renewed. In our encounters as well as in our regular prayer, we want to make a promise too. Rarely would it be simply saying, *I promise to encounter you again*, although that could work. Rather, our promise might best be based on a shortened version of what Ignatius suggests, in the *Exercises*, for ending a prayer session with a colloquy: “The colloquy is made by speaking exactly as one friend speaks to another.”¹⁵ In commenting on the colloquy for the Second Week, he adds, “According to the light that I have received, I will beg for grace to follow and imitate more closely our Lord.”¹⁶ In other words, we want to draw our words of promise from what we have just experienced in our encounter with the Lord. But this is no different from what Tom and George did when ending their luncheon or when walking past each other on a crowded sidewalk!

In summary: put something into words—be it a petition, an insight, a word of thanks. Then, do not rehearse the words ahead of time,

¹⁵ *SpEx* 54.

¹⁶ *SpEx* 109.

just blurt them out, but use real words with whole sentences, so as to give meaning to the words. While our deepest experiences—including our experiences of God—transcend words, we need words and sentences in order to understand our experiences and to connect those experiences to the rest of our lives. Thus does Ignatius suggest the colloquy at the end of prayer in the *Exercises*, and for this reason I propose that we close our encounters with Christ—including our regular prayer—with words.

IV. Imagination and the Risen Christ

Earlier in this article, I described connecting with the Risen Christ as making ourselves aware that he is aware of us. So far, however, I have paid no attention to the question, *With what or whom am I connecting?* The obvious answer to that question is that we are connecting with the Risen Christ. But no one knows what the Risen Lord truly looks like; and in many ways, since he is God, we cannot see him as he is. This is where our imagination comes into play. But this typically is not imagination such as we intend when making the Spiritual Exercises.¹⁷ In these brief daily encounters as I describe them here, our imagination generally focuses directly on the Risen Lord, and we ordinarily do not return to gospel scenes except insofar as we remember them as a relevant part of the life of the Risen Lord.

In order to understand this more fully, let us consider the Resurrection passages themselves. In all of these passages, there is some sense of a presence that is not immediately recognized by those in the scene. Then, Jesus does something to associate that presence with the disciples' memories of him from before he died. So, for example, on the shore of the sea of Tiberius, Jesus calls out to the disciples who are fishing, "Haven't you caught anything, friends?" (John 21:4). When they respond in

¹⁷ See, for example, the Second Prelude of the Second Contemplation the Incarnation and the Nativity (*SpEx* 112) or the three points for the same contemplation (*SpEx* 114–16). In the fifth and final contemplation for the Incarnation and Nativity, Ignatius specifies the use of each of the senses except taste (*SpEx* 122–25). He wants us to enter into the gospel scene with our imagination.

the negative, he says, “Throw the net out to starboard and you’ll find something” (John 21:6). They do, and the net is overloaded. Then, with those familiar words that harken back to the calling of the first disciples, the disciple whom Jesus loved exclaims, “It is the Lord” (John 21:7). In a similar way, the other Resurrection passages also suggest the Risen Lord at first not being recognized but then doing something that enables the disciples to connect that presence with their memories of Jesus before he died—for example, “Mary!” (John 20:16), “Put your finger here” (John 20:27), and the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:30–31, 35).

Here the question arises: why did they not recognize him immediately? In responding to this question, we need to remember that the Risen Lord is in the fullness of his divinity, and that, according to an ancient Israelite tradition, we cannot see God face to face and live (Exod 33:20). In the First Letter of John, the author tells us that, after our own resurrections, we become like God because we do see God face to face (1 John 3:2). But right now we simply cannot see God or the Risen Lord directly. It is too much. So that presence had to be reduced, so to speak, to something more manageable for the disciples. Stimulated by Jesus’s words or actions that harken back to their memories of him from before he died, they are able to see a glorified version of the Jesus whom they remember. Had the Risen Lord tweaked their imaginations to help them? We do not know; but we do know that there was no way they could have taken in the fullness of the Risen Lord as he truly is.

Here is an important point that may help in our encounters with the Lord. Was the Risen Lord fully present to the disciples? Absolutely. But the Risen Lord was also at the other side of the universe and beyond: he was at the right hand of the Father; he was and is everywhere. In fact, the Risen Lord is just as present to each one of us everywhere and at all times as he was to the disciples shortly after his Resurrection. Indeed, to say that he is less present anywhere would be to deny his divinity.

This means that we may and perhaps should use our imaginations to help us become aware of his constant presence to us. And if we experience that presence as loving, then we cannot go wrong, since we know that God is love (1 John 4:8). This does not mean that his presence cannot be challenging, prophetic, or, at times, uncomfortable for us. Moreover, it is not necessary to have picture book images of his pres-

ence: we don't need to imagine the color of his eyebrows or the length of his hair; in fact, focusing on those kinds of details can be a distraction. Rather, our encounter simply involves a sense of a loving presence who is profoundly aware of us and who loves us more than we can possibly imagine.

In developing our relationship with Christ, we thus need to let our imaginations help us throughout the day, and not just in formal prayer. Suppose, for example, that I am sitting in my room or office, with a minute or two to spare before leaving or seeing someone. I can take a moment to image his presence in the room, to make myself aware that he is lovingly aware of me, perhaps to make myself briefly aware of his concerns and hopes for me and for our world, and then to end by thanking him briefly or asking either for his help or for a particular grace. The whole sequence might take no more than a few seconds, and some of our thoughts might not even require words. What matters is that, regardless of how brief the encounter, we connect with the Lord. If we do this occasionally throughout the day, then we stand to enhance our awareness of his presence in our lives and to grow in our appreciation of what our relationship with him means.

While it is unnecessary for us to have picture-book representations of this loving presence, images can and do help us to connect with the Risen Lord. And while the images for the Risen Lord's presence to us are unlimited, it might help here to offer three categories, drawn respectively from the major feasts of the Easter season—Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost—and to illustrate each kind with an example or two. Easter gives us images of the Risen Lord near us, in and involved in our world. Jesus is speaking to us, walking with us, helping us to catch fish, eating with us, and so on. This suggests an abundance of images of the Risen Lord in our daily lives. He is present in this room with me; he is taking a walk with me; he is riding in my car; he is alongside me when I am doing ministry. So, for example, I am driving somewhere by myself. Why not take a few moments to make myself aware that he is there and aware of me? Perhaps I might reach out and imagine myself grabbing his hand. I must confess that this specific gesture has made me, a former cab driver, a bit more courteous on the road! Or briefly imagine him walking beside you as you move down the hall: let a few good thoughts come in, and thank him for his presence. Sometimes I combine images.

I might imagine him with me somewhere and at the same time imagine him weeping over Jerusalem, this time “Jerusalem” being those parts of the modern world torn by hunger and violence.

The Ascension provides a whole different set of images. According to the Ascension, where is Jesus and what is he doing? In the Kyrie, we address the Resurrected Lord, saying, *You are seated at the right hand of the Father to intercede for us.* Many of us have had the experience of needing to get through to someone with power or authority. If we need a favor from someone very important, and a friend says, *I’m having dinner with her tomorrow evening and I’ll bring your concerns to her attention,* we’d be very grateful. Well, goodness, we have the Lord of the universe interceding for us right now at the heart of the Trinity! For this reason, I can feel certain that the Trinity is lovingly mindful of me and of my concerns, and this is exemplified in the image of Jesus interceding for me. So, for example, when I am seriously ill and feel the isolation that often comes from illness: I take a moment to make myself aware of Jesus’s presence to me and to connect with him, aware that the same presence is speaking up for me in the heart of the Trinity. It will not necessarily make my illness go away, but it can deepen my awareness of his love for me and give me a deeper appreciation of his overwhelming compassion.

Finally, Pentecost offers yet another set of images. If the Ascension takes us up into the heart of the Trinity, then Pentecost brings the Trinity into our own hearts. Here I can imagine the Risen Christ making his home inside of me. I remember several years ago, while on retreat at an old farm house outside of St. Louis, feeling restless during one of my prayer periods and deciding to walk down into a small valley to encounter the Risen Lord. As I approached the place of encounter, I had a sense of something moving behind me and to my left. It could have been anything—a deer, the breeze moving a branch, whatever—but I chose to say to the Lord, *well, thank you, you’re on your way to meet me.* As I got to the place of encounter, I stopped, waiting for him to arrive. Nothing happened. After two or three minutes, I began to move back up the hill. I said to the Lord, *well, at least you gave me that slight movement while I was walking down.* Immediately, the thought came into my head, *Ed, where on earth do you think I’ve been all this time? Yes, right inside of you!* That experience has stayed with me, and many a time I imagine the Risen Lord in me and at times in those around me. The experience from

my retreat took a number of minutes, and I was in the midst of formal, albeit restless, prayer. Ordinarily, however, this sense of him inside of me takes only seconds, always starting with me becoming aware that he is in me and aware of me.

V. A Practical Run-Through

Since George and Tom exemplified for us a manner of personal relationship, I am going to invite them to take us through a few brief encounters with the Risen Christ.

George is driving to the nice Italian restaurant to have lunch with Tom. He has just been talking with his wife about their visit to the doctor regarding her cancer, so her health is heavy on his mind. He decides to encounter the Lord. He starts by making himself aware that Christ is very much aware of him and sitting next to him in the car. He may even reach out his hand to imagine taking Christ's hand. With or without words, he conveys his worries to Christ and imagines Christ enveloping him and his wife. He then puts his worries and his petition to Christ into real words, and thanks Christ for being so compassionate.

Tom is sitting in his office waiting for a colleague to arrive. He takes a moment and makes himself aware of Christ's loving presence and of Christ's awareness of him. He basks in their connectedness for a moment, hears his colleague coming down the hall, and finds himself asking for Christ's loving compassion for George and his wife.

Later in the day, Tom is walking to his car. He decides to imagine the Lord walking with him. He again makes himself aware that Christ is there and lovingly aware of him. He has no particular agenda and simply enjoys the thought of walking with the Lord. This lasts a while, because the car is a bit of a walk and because the walk is an easy one with no distractions, even though Tom distracts himself slightly by trying to keep in step with Christ. He concludes the encounter by expressing his gratitude to Christ for being with him.

Finally, in the early afternoon, George is sitting in his office think-

ing about his wife's cancer and worrying about what he will do if the cancer turns out to be fatal. How will he survive without her, and what about the children? He turns to Christ as before, making himself aware. He imagines Christ's compassion for his wife and also for himself and the children. Somehow the image of the earthly Christ weeping over Jerusalem creeps into his mind, and with that the thought of all the terrible suffering that people are currently experiencing throughout the world enters his thoughts. For a moment he wonders, *how can Christ be concerned for me and my family when so much tragic suffering is going on everywhere?* And yet he knows that Christ's compassionate love for his family is real. He concludes asking the Lord to help him to empty himself more completely so that he can love his wife and his children the way they need to be loved, and not worry about himself.

VI. Regular Prayer

This article has focused on connecting with Christ by means of short encounters throughout the day. Much of what I have written could apply to longer prayer as well, but this has not been my primary topic. Nevertheless, I do not wish to leave the impression that regular daily prayer for longer periods is not important. Regular prayer plays an essential role in our relationship with Christ, just as longer encounters or time together play an important role in any human relationship. Let me mention two ways in which our regular prayer also serves as an anchor for our shorter encounters.

First, we need quiet in our lives in order to move more quickly into these shorter encounters. This does not mean that we have to take a period of quiet before starting the encounter, but it does mean that we need enough quiet inside of ourselves that we can become aware of Christ without too much background noise. This is no different than being able to listen to someone who wants to talk about something serious. We need quiet in order to listen, and our regular, more extended prayer goes a long way toward creating the interior silence necessary for listening to others and for becoming aware of Christ more frequently in the course of the day.

Second, regular prayer not only enables these encounters to take place, but also helps us build our relationship with Christ both within and beyond these encounters. Regular prayer gives us the opportunity to ponder Christ, which is slightly different from connecting with Christ. It means taking time to absorb who he is and how he is engaged in my life and in the world around me. Luke Timothy Johnson compares “learning his wife” to “learning Christ,” and two of the aspects he dwells on proper to both relationships are “attentiveness” and “meditation.”¹⁸ Pondering or contemplating Christ, whether from the accounts in Scripture or from his presence in our daily lives, realistically cannot take place very often inside our short encounters. We need time and space to absorb the reality of Christ’s love and life, and to put on the mind of Christ. Regular prayer and quiet are essential for this.

In addition, we can use the elements of connection, shared meaning, and words of promise in our regular prayer as well. Connecting by making myself aware of his awareness of me is always a good way to begin prayer, and saying something at the end of prayer in real words using a whole sentence is a good way to end any form of prayer. And there is a myriad of ways to share personal meaning. Praying with Scripture is almost always letting the Lord share the meaning of his life with me, and my response to what I read, hear, or receive involves sharing my personal meaning with him.

Connecting—or in this case, reconnecting—is also a good way during prayer to recover from distractions. When I find that my mind has been wandering, I can go back to where I started and reconnect with Christ by once again making myself aware that he is aware of me. In fact, I no longer apologize for distractions, ever since the time I felt him laughing at me and saying, *Come on, Ed, quit focusing on yourself and look at me!* Incidentally, simply abiding in that awareness that he is aware of me and staying with that image or thought sometimes can be the entire content for regular prayer, even though it probably will be necessary to reconnect periodically and then re-abide if there are distractions.

¹⁸ Johnson, *Living Jesus*, 60–74.

VII. Some Personal Amendments

One danger in writing about spirituality is that it always makes the spiritual life seem more orderly and organized than it is. Making thoughts about human experience clear often requires organizing things into categories and then presenting them in an orderly fashion. Unfortunately, real experience does not always fit the categories and follow the outlines we present. No two people pray the same way, and it is probably safe to say that no two prayer experiences are ever the same, even for the same person. That having been said, let me make a few observations about my own experience of these short encounters.

In the last few pages, I have discussed connecting with the Risen Lord for short periods of time throughout the day. While starting out this practice may seem contrived, it becomes more natural with practice, and after some time we tend to develop a sense of Christ's presence in the background even when we are not focused on him. Not every encounter will necessarily be an intense sense of presence and love. Sometimes it may seem more forced and even reluctant on our part, while at other times it might be more intense. Sometimes, it might seem that he is taking the initiative more than I am, while other times I am having to push it—just as in human relationships in general. And, while dryness and distractedness know no boundaries, we must remember that the value lies not simply in each individual encounter but in the ongoing relationship, and that the benefits are beyond compare. In this sense, I gradually grow in the conviction that I am never alone, and that even in times of darkness I can trust that the total meaning and fulfillment of my life is both beside me and within me.

I cannot tell you how long such encounters last for me. Usually, they go on for only a short amount of time—seconds—but I know that sometimes they go longer; and occasionally—especially when driving—they last much longer; or perhaps more accurately, they come and go over a longer period of time. Nor can I say how often I do this during a particular day, and that is not because there are too many of these experiences to count! Instinct tells me that I should never start with a particular number in mind: my goal should be just to do it and then to see what happens. Interestingly, I cannot recall when or even why I began

to practice these encounters in my own life. Only in the last couple of years have I thought to reflect on the exercise, even though I know that they began much earlier.

VIII. With Gratitude to Him

Before joining the Society, I was not a prayerful person. I went to Mass on Sundays, and that was the sum of my religious practice. My vocation came out of nowhere, and I did not expect to stay in the Jesuits. But from the first night of the Exercises, which in those days we did in October, everything changed. The retreat itself was an extraordinary revelation to me. While I went into the retreat with little or no knowledge of Christ, I came out of it with a very different perspective. For sure, much in my life would change over the years, and much more needs to change. But when I came out of that first time with the Exercises I felt that I had been transformed, even though I knew that it was only a beginning.

One day, probably several weeks after the retreat ended, I was at the novitiate villa not far from the novitiate. It had been excessively cloudy for some days, which is not unusual for St. Louis at that time of the year—there was not a spot of blue sky for what seemed like weeks. While I was walking outside, the cloud cover lifted slightly and spots of blue appeared. I was thrilled! Even though the sun never came out, I felt like I had been transported to a bit of paradise. As I was admiring the sky, the thought came to compare this to my new experience of Christ. Even though there were only a few spots of blue, they were wonderful compared to no blue before. I thought that my relationship with Christ was similar: before, there was nothing; but now, even though just a bit, it was wonderful.

As for all of us, there have been difficult times in my years as a Jesuit. Some days, the sky seemed more black than even totally cloudy with dim light. Perhaps those periods are necessary for us, as we need to learn to love, trusting in God's loving presence while not feeling it. Undoubtedly, I did my own part to bring on the darkness. Nevertheless, in these last years of my life, the sun is often out; and while the sky is

not totally clear, it certainly is spotted with blue. I cannot say whether the practice of these frequent encounters with Christ has brought this about, or whether God himself has brought about these encounters by increasing his light. Maybe, as with so much in life, it is both/and. In any case, I will continue these daily encounters because I know that he is here, because I trust in his love for me, because I like the fact that he is beginning to diminish the self in me (barely!), and above all because I am grateful for the bedrock of joy that has been his most wonderful gift.

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