



SESSION 4

I Believe in Jesus Christ



Detail from *Saint Ignatius of Loyola's Vision of Christ and God the Father*, Domenichino Zampieri

SESSION OBJECTIVES

- To see Jesus Christ as the center of both Scripture and history
- To examine how the Old Testament points to the New and how the New illuminates the Old
- To understand some of the ways in which Jesus fulfills the Old Testament expectations for a Messiah
- To ask the decisive question of missionary activity: what, or who, is the motivation?
- To develop insight into the humanity and personality of Christ, as revealed in his words and ministry

STEP 1: Begin

OPENING PRAYER

Take, Lord, receive all my freedom, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will. All that I have and cherish you have given me. I surrender it all to be guided by your will. Your love and your grace are wealth enough for me. Grant me these, Lord Jesus, and I ask for nothing more. Amen.

— *Suscipe prayer, Saint Ignatius of Loyola*

INTRODUCTION

“But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal 4:4–5). This is “the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1); God has visited his people. He has fulfilled the promise he made to Abraham and his descendants. He acted far beyond all expectation—he has sent his own “beloved Son” (Mark 1:11; cf. Luke 1:55, 68). (CCC 422)

When the time had fully come—at a moment in history, just the right moment, God entered the world in such dramatic fashion that it marked history’s center point. Everything leading up to that point became designated B.C., before Christ, and everything after referred back to his coming, A.D., “the year of our Lord” (in Latin, *anno Domini*). This linguistic convention manifests the singularity of the person of Jesus Christ.

So who was he, this figure whose coming split history in two?

This session begins our reflection on Jesus of Nazareth. This meditation begins with the creedal confession “I believe in Jesus Christ,” which carries through the next few sessions. As we will discover, history has no other figure like Jesus, whose coming was prepared for in the Old Testament and captured with subtlety and depth in the Gospels.

STEP 2: Learn

SETTING THE STAGE

St. Augustine, Florida, lays claim to the site of the first Mass celebrated in what became the United States of America. On September 8, 1565, on the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Father Francisco López came ashore and offered the Eucharist in praise and thanksgiving to God. In this missionary zeal and courage, we find a remarkable example of how Jesus’ life inspires and transforms those who love him.

Merciful and wise, God chose a people to be his own and prepared them for the coming of the Messiah, who would save them from their sins. Jesus Christ fulfills all that God taught and promised his Chosen People. So who is Jesus? What was he like? The Gospels paint a striking and nuanced portrait of the man who stands at the center of history and Scripture.

Leader

I. The motivation to cross an ocean was “I believe in Jesus Christ”

II. Salvation History: The Old Testament points to the coming of Christ

- A. The Old Testament chronicles the events and people living under the effects of the Fall
- B. In Genesis, the first sin marks the beginning of a sad history of sin
- C. God continues to guide history, bringing good out of evil

1. God's direction of the course of the world is called his providence
2. This providence prepares the way for Christ through the figures and events of the Old Testament
3. The heroes of old show both the need for a savior, through their shortcomings, and also what this savior would be like, through their virtues and heroic actions
- D. The Bible is one book, with Christ as the unifying center
 1. The whole Old Testament is really a prophecy of his coming
 2. The redeemer for whom God's Chosen People hoped is revealed to be Jesus Christ
 3. The New Testament recounts the revelation of the Savior

III. Pilgrimage: A missionary's motivation is the encounter with Christ

- A. Mission Nombre de Dios was a peaceful place, the fruit of a tumultuous voyage
- B. This was a catechetical voyage at heart—the missionaries were motivated by love of Christ

IV. Catechesis: Jesus was a rabbi like no other

- A. The Jewish people had lots of rabbis, but Jesus was different
 1. He called, and people followed
 2. He announced the Kingdom of God—he is the royal Son of David, the Messiah
 3. He taught with authority, calling to love
- B. The core of his message was mercy
 1. To the woman caught in adultery, Jesus offered mercy, asking for her repentance
 2. He wants to offer us mercy, too, and all we have to do is turn to him
- C. Jesus' life hinted at something more
 1. He seemed to do things that only God could do
 2. Something of the divine was breaking through: "This truly is the Son of God"

V. *Lectio divina*: Daniel 7:13–14

- A. The vision reveals "one like a son of man"
- B. God makes magnificent promises to the Israelites, a tiny, unknown people
- C. We ought not underestimate God: he did great things for Israel, and he will do great things for us as well

VI. An encounter with Jesus' mercy and love can heal us, transform our lives, and empower us to share that same love with others

What separates Christ from all men is that first He was expected; even the Gentiles had a longing for a deliverer, or redeemer. This fact alone distinguishes Him from all other religious leaders. A second distinguishing fact is that once He appeared, He struck history with such impact that He split it in two, dividing it into two periods: one before His coming, the other after it.

— Venerable Fulton Sheen, *Life of Christ*, chap. 1

WORD MEANING:

Mercy

Sorrow of heart (in Latin, *misericordia*) at another person's suffering or lack that prompts an effort to alleviate this suffering or remedy the lack.

STEP 3: Engage

- 1) Think of some Bible passages that you are familiar with. Why do we say that Jesus is the central and unifying figure of the whole Bible? How might this insight change or deepen our understanding of the Scriptures?

Any part of Scripture is fair game here, and indeed some will bring a wealth of scriptural knowledge. But the main goal is to see how the Old Testament remains incomplete without Christ, since it points forward to his coming. In the “problems” that the Old Testament sets up (e.g., Original Sin, suffering, God’s gradual pedagogy), we see the prelude for the “solution” in Jesus Christ. In the prophecies of the Old Testament, we see how Christ fulfills them and helps us to understand their meaning more clearly. In the New Testament as well, we see not only the accounts of Christ’s life, but also how these form the foundation for what follows in the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles. In general, exploring these answers and themes should deepen our appreciation for how Christ is the center of the whole of Scripture and thus how he governs its interpretation.

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- 2) What general portrait of Jesus Christ emerges from the Gospels? What are his defining traits or characteristics? How might these explain the enduring relevance and recognition of Jesus? Jesus is the center of both history and Sacred Scripture—and neither can be fully understood without him. History has been molded by Christ’s entrance into the world and by his invitation to follow him and to enter into his Father’s house. Sacred Scripture finds its unity in the figure of Christ; the Old Testament points to him, and the New Testament hails his arrival and records the first fruits of his death and Resurrection. Both illuminate the figure of Jesus Christ as the long-foretold Messiah and reveal God’s mercy coming into the world.

As with the previous question, the answers here can have a wide range, but all are intended to raise our awareness of the multifaceted and paradoxical figure of Jesus and our subsequent wonder at and love for him. Jesus in the Gospels is aware of who he is and what his mission is; indeed, he is single-minded in doing his Father’s will and showing mercy toward those in need. At the same time, he learns, changes, and grows in various ways. Jesus is truly human; he is vulnerable and even weak in certain respects, for example, in his need for sleep, food, etc. In other respects—primarily related to character—he is eminently

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strong and even immovable. His love can be both gentle and demanding. His attention to those in need, both physical and spiritual, and his care for them is consistent and even astonishing. He gives of himself constantly and fully even before the ultimate gift of his life on the Cross. Growing to appreciate and love such points is the goal of the conversation around this question. As we do that, it becomes relatively easy to see why Christ continues to be relevant and a “sign of contradiction” in today’s world—he is unlike any other person and this draws out intrigue from most, hatred from some, and love from those who can call him friend.

- 3) Before this session, how would you have described Jesus? Were any points in this session challenging for you to accept? What intrigues you about Jesus now that you have watched the video?

This question might elicit a host of answers, ranging from Jesus as the judgmental, condemning enemy of sin to Jesus as the gentle, accepting, and nature-loving teacher. All answers will likely have at least a shred of truth; and most will have more than a shred. But prior to a robust exploration of who Jesus is, many, if not all, will have a hard time holding together the truths in each of these views. The figure of Jesus is larger than life, and we should not be surprised that he embodies traits and displays actions that can seem contradictory, e.g., hating the sin while loving the sinner, bringing both peace and the sword, etc. This question is less about right or wrong answers—though certainly assertions against Christ’s divinity, humanity, sinlessness, and the like should be gently corrected—and more about becoming aware of the partial truths most have of Jesus and the growth towards a vision of the whole truth. Not only that, but knowing Jesus more fully leads to seeing what a remarkable, charismatic, and attractive teacher he would have been and still is.

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- 4) The expeditions to the New World are wrapped in complexities. This history includes examples of both astounding heroism and appalling injustice. But if the goal was to introduce people to the mercy of Jesus Christ, what lessons can we draw from the missionaries to the Americas? What are some modern equivalents of the New World, where we might share the Gospel and carry out the work of evangelization?

There’s no doubt that the expeditions and missions to the New World are fraught with moral complexity. Because this isn’t the last time this topic will arise, it’s likely a good time to acknowledge all of this and give others a chance to voice concerns they might have. Without letting these concerns derail the conversation, fairness indicates that the failures of many should be acknowledged forthrightly while also recognizing the heroic love for Christ and his Church that motivated the missionaries. When we focus on their love and remarkable witness, we can discover how much we can learn from these early missionaries. Some might mention the missionaries’ strong awareness of our need for mercy and forgiveness. Do we feel this as urgently today? We should. Others might point out new frontiers that

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are ripe for the ongoing work of the New Evangelization: the internet, a public sphere severed from its Christian roots, marriage and family life, artistic and cultural domains, etc. An important point that might go less noticed is the need for sacrifice and suffering for the sake of the Gospel. If Christ suffered for us and if these missionaries show their love through sacrificing comfort, reputation, and even their lives, why do we sometimes expect that following Christ and bringing him to others will be easy and make few real demands on us?

STEP 4: Conclude

Although Jesus breaks into history and divides it in two, learning about him is much more than a history lesson. Jesus tells us that he came to bring the sword and to divide the world (see Matt 10:34 and Luke 12:51). He certainly divides history, but the division he brings goes even deeper: encountering Christ requires a judgment and a decision on our part. Because people will judge differently, they will be divided. As we learn about Jesus, we have to ask ourselves: What judgment will I reach about Jesus, and which side will I be standing on?

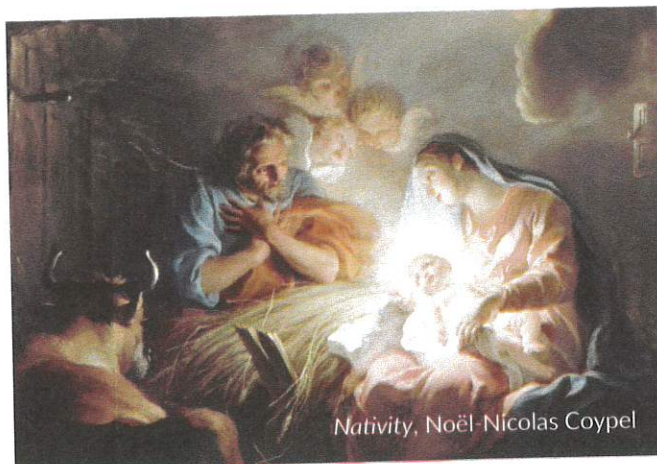
CLOSING PRAYER

Dear Jesus, help me to spread Your fragrance everywhere I go.

Flood my soul with Your spirit and life.

Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that all my life may only be a radiance of Yours.

— From Saint John Henry Newman, *Radiating Christ*



MEMORY VERSE

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in those last days he has spoken to us by a Son.

— HEBREWS 1:1-2

CALL TO CONVERSION

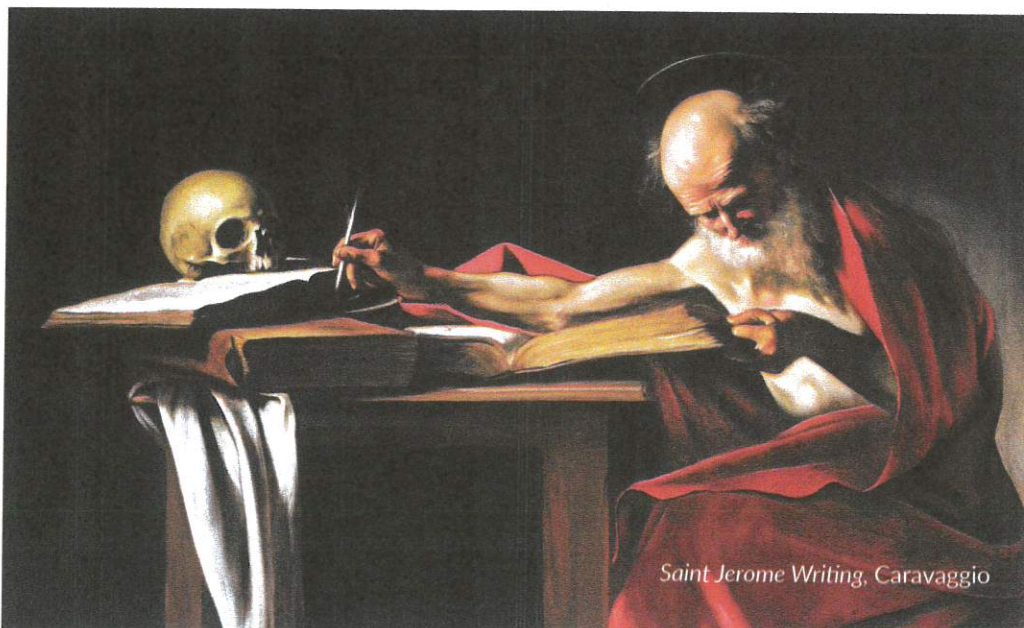
One of the Church's early scholars and translators of the Bible was Saint Jerome. Never one to mince words, Saint Jerome forcefully insisted, "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ." We can draw out two important points here.

First, if we don't know the Gospels, which tell of Jesus' life, then we will have a hard time knowing Jesus. Some of our greatest challenges in embracing Christ wholeheartedly arise from not knowing him well enough, not understanding him, and not maturing in our familiarity with him as we mature in life. The best remedy is to take Saint Jerome's words to heart: read the Gospels!

What obstacles keep you from reading the Gospels? What misunderstandings might have prevented you from receiving the message of Jesus Christ?

The second key point is that Saint Jerome doesn't say, "Ignorance of the *Gospels* is ignorance of Christ." He says, "Ignorance of *Scripture*." These words come from his commentary on the prophet Isaiah, an Old Testament book. Saint Jerome knows that God's wisdom has established a harmony between the Old and New Testaments, with each illuminating the other. What views, if any, have you formed about the Old Testament? Are you growing to appreciate how the Old Testament prepares the way for the New and the New brings out the fullest meaning of the Old?

To grow in knowledge of Christ, we must also familiarize ourselves with the books of the Bible. Consider how much information you consume in a day—from books, websites, social media, and television. How important are these activities in the grand scheme of things? How much of that time could you set aside to read Scripture, especially the Gospels? What can be more important than learning about the remarkable figure of Jesus Christ? Ask the Lord to help you develop a love for spending time reading the Bible, so you may discover—and often rediscover—Jesus as Scripture presents him. Of course, this discovery isn't a race, nor is it just a matter of becoming familiar with words. It's about encountering Christ and God's loving plan of salvation, both of which are revealed to us in the pages of Sacred Scripture.



Saint Jerome Writing, Caravaggio

DIGGING DEEPER

The center point of the Christian confession is that Jesus Christ is both true God and true man. In this session we focus on his humanity. What were the Old Testament's expectations for the Messiah? What do the Gospels relay about Jesus' life and ministry? What would it have been like to encounter the man himself, Jesus Christ? In all these questions, our aim is to appreciate that Christ was fully human.

What does this mean? It means that Jesus shares the same human nature we all have—that he is like us in all things but sin. And what does this mean for us?

The Gospel of John includes a short but striking passage: Jesus “knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man” (2:25). As a man, Jesus knew firsthand what it is like to be human and to live a human life. He didn't acquire this knowledge from outside observation or from others; he knew it from his own lived experience. Because of this experience, Jesus knows and understands each of us with a familiar, even intimate, knowledge. He knows our joys and triumphs, our sufferings and sorrows. He knows us through and through, and we can relate to him as one friend to another because we have so much of the human experience in common.

Later in Saint John's Gospel, we gain a sense of Jesus' love for his friends. After Lazarus, a friend whom Jesus loves, falls ill and dies (see 11:3,14), Jesus arrives amid much sorrow in Bethany, where the man's family lives. “When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled; and he said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus wept. So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’” (John 11:33–36). Jesus loved his friend deeply, with a human love that is moved by suffering and weeps at loss. Jesus loves each of us in this same way: wholeheartedly, filled with joy by our victories and moved with sorrow by our losses.

What does Jesus' being fully human mean for us? It means he knows and loves us in a way that is profoundly human. The *Catechism* summarizes this and connects it with the well-known Catholic devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a pious practice that shows a great appreciation for Christ's humanity:

Jesus knew and loved us each and all during his life. ... He has loved us all with a human heart. For this reason, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, pierced by our sins and for our salvation, “is quite rightly considered the chief sign and symbol of that ... love with which the divine Redeemer continually loves the eternal Father and all human beings” without exception. (CCC 478, citing Pius XII's encyclical *Haurietis aquas*)

FOR FURTHER READING

Matthew 1–2, Luke 1–2, and John 1–3

Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1

Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 422–478

Venerable Fulton Sheen, *Life of Christ*