

## Loving and Knowing Jesus

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In the foreword to the first volume of his *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict XVI reveals the deep theological and pastoral concern that inspired his labors. Owing to certain currents in biblical studies from the 1950s on, an impression has become widely diffused that "we have little certain knowledge of Jesus and that only at a later stage did faith in his divinity shape the image we have of him."

This theological challenge has immediate pastoral consequences. Benedict rightly discerns that this constitutes "a dramatic situation for faith, because its point of reference is being placed in doubt: Intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air."

Intimate friendship with Jesus is the heart of the matter.

Benedict had already sounded a similar theme in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*. In a much-quoted sentence, he writes: "Being 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. Saint John's Gospel describes that event in these words: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should. . . have eternal life." (3:16)

This "encounter" by its very nature is destined to grow into an abiding "friendship" as the Last Supper Discourse in Saint John's Gospel makes clear. "No longer do I call you servants. . . but I have called you friends." (Jn 15:15) "Abide in me and I in you. . . He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." (Jn 15:4-5)

I would like to explore three dimensions of "friendship with Jesus" that may serve us as we all seek to appropriate and deepen this call to friendship with the Lord.

First is what the liturgical and theological Tradition speaks of as the "prevenient" love of Jesus. Friendship with Christ is not our initiative nor is it within our natural capacity. It depends utterly on the initiative of Jesus. "Love of Jesus" is, in the first instance, Jesus' love of us. Saint Paul is firm in his persuasion: "the Lord Jesus who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal 1:20)

Our love of Jesus is our grace-endowed and grateful response to his love of us even to death, death on a cross. I can still remember the deep affection with which, as a youngster participating in the Stations of the Cross, I joined with many in professing: "I love you, Jesus my love, I repent

of having offended you.”

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A second dimension of friendship with Jesus flows from this. Namely, the love of Jesus gives rise to our knowledge of Jesus. My primary knowledge of the Lord is that of his love for me. To adapt Paul: I know “the Lord Jesus who loves me and gives himself for me.” Real, not merely notional, knowledge of Jesus is the abiding fruit of love of Jesus. And the experiential setting for this knowledge is the Church’s celebration of the Eucharist where Jesus’ loving self-gift is re-presented and made actual.

So our knowledge of Jesus has its genesis as an affective, interpersonal knowledge. It is the type of knowledge to which Pascal points in his famous dictum: “the heart has its reasons which reason does not comprehend.” It underlies John Henry Newman’s conviction that “heart speaks to heart.” One may call it a “participatory knowledge,” the mutual knowledge that characterizes true friendship, as friends share one another’s values, views, and virtues.

Of course, here we have an absolutely unique friendship and relation: Jesus remains ever the teacher and we the disciples; Jesus ever the Head and we the members of his Body. Thus one comes to “know” Jesus more deeply the more one is conformed to him. “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” (Jn 15:14) These “commands,” however, are not obedience to external precepts, but adhering to a person, making one’s own the vision and mission of Jesus, abiding in his love.

Paul, apostle and mystic, brings out the depth of his identification with his Savior. “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” (Gal 2:20) And all the great Christian spiritual masters have each, in his or her own fashion, echoed Paul’s cry.

This “Christification,” this being configured to Christ, begins in baptism. But the seed planted there must be nourished so that the plant may grow sturdy. And then it must be further pruned and strengthened to withstand the “wickedness and snares” of world, flesh, and devil. Its full flowering will come only when the Lord gathers his beloved from the ends of the earth into the Kingdom of the Father.

The third dimension of our friendship with Jesus is already adumbrated in the previous quote from Paul. As Paul and all the saints bear witness: growth in friendship with Christ entails an ever more generous embrace of his Cross. In the Letter to the Philippians Paul recounts his own experience of “cruciformity.” He speaks of the life-giving loss of all he had formerly counted of worth, the prideful pomp of the “flesh:” pedigree, accomplishments, death-dealing zeal for the ego-inflating cause. All unmasked as vanity in the revelatory light of “knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” (Phil 3:8)

Yet, at the same time, Paul humbly acknowledges not yet being “perfected” (*teleios*), not yet fully transformed: “But I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. .

.forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.” (Phil 3:12-13) Only at the end of our journey shall we finally know and love even as we are known and loved.

This conviction undergirds and continually nourishes the excruciating, transfiguring adventure of our friendship with him who is Savior, Lord, ever-faithful Friend.

**\*Image:** *The Crucifixion* <sup>[1]</sup> by Paolo Veneziano c. 1340/1345 [National Gallery, Washington, DC]

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[1] *The Crucifixion*: <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.284.html>

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