

The Many Faces of Jesus at the Mass for Christ

By RICHARD LEVITON©1995

Probably no other subject in history has so vexed the human mind as the true nature of Jesus the Christ. But it's supposed to. That's why it is a Mystery.

First off, was Jesus a human being? I mean a human (or man, in this case) like the men we know today or like the men Jesus' apostles would have known among the Palestinians two millennia ago. Nikos Kazantzakis, the celebrated Greek novelist, looked at the ramifications of answering "yes" to this question in his acclaimed (and controversial) *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Originally written in the 1950s, Kazantzakis' novel was made into a film a few years ago by Martin Scorsese with the role of Jesus played by the unlikely yet perfect choice of Willem Dafoe. We'd seen him in other movies playing a drug dealer, a lascivious lawyer, and a jaded CIA operative.

Kazantzakis agonized over the seemingly dual nature of Jesus, half mortal man boiling with desires, half god aflame with revelation. In *Zorba the Greek* and *Report to Greco*, Kazantzakis struggled to express the delicate balance point between the celestial and earthly, both as they are epitomized by the incarnate Jesus and as every woman and man learns the minute they launch any effort at spiritual development.

Kazantzakis' heretical question in *Last Temptation* was this: what if Jesus succumbed to the third temptation? In his desert solitude, he had been duly tempted by the emissaries of the Old Enemy. Here is worldly power, knowledge, and control. Will you take it up? I can surely give these to you, said the Devil. Jesus declines and vows not to stir from his meditations until he has had a direct sign from on high as to whether his teaching style shall be the rose or the sword. As it turns out, it's the sword, and Jesus returns to his faithful apostles brimming with righteous zeal and a sharp blade.

Soon after this, he shakes things up at the Temple of Jerusalem, overthrowing the moneylender's stalls and insulting the rabbis. Everyone knows how the story ends. He gets nailed to the cross. All his life he has been both avoiding and approaching this destiny. As a young carpenter, he tried to defy God, to make the Creator truly hate him, by making crucifixes with which the atheist Romans could make martyrs out of his fellow Jews. Jesus figured if he really insulted God, the Ancient One of Days would abandon the plans to anoint Jesus as the savior on account of his revolting behavior. It didn't work; God still wanted him.

On his first day on Golgotha, his palms and soles nailed bloodily to the thick wood, Jesus' guardian angel appears. She is a cherubic young girl, eternally preadolescent and trailing whispers of harps and heavenly balm. You have done your work, she announces. God says you don't have to die. You can come down now. She unbinds him and escorts him back home where he marries first Mary Magdalen, who subsequently dies in childbirth, then Martha, and raises a family. He lives a full, if uneventful, human life, with all the pleasures and sorrows of a man's time on Earth, then lies in bed, approaching death. Judas and a few other apostolic stalwarts arrive, both to wish him godspeed and to castigate him for his cowardice.

Jesus, white-haired, hoary, and dying, has a flash of knowing: I was seduced on the cross. That was not my guardian angel, but the Old Enemy in disguise. That was my last temptation and I failed it. However, once he sees this, he is instantly back on the cross. All his life as an ordinary human has been an illusion outside of time. On the cross again, he gladly fulfills his destiny, dying so he can ascend on behalf of humanity. It is accomplished, he whispers, and is gone.

So, the image of Jesus as human, as portrayed by the earnest spiritual pilgrim Kazantzakis, dramatizes the poignant paradox: a celestial being cannot live among humans and within a human body without partaking of its earthly, *humanly* nature. A god incarnating as a man must live as a man who remembers his godhood. It couldn't

possibly be otherwise. Supreme detachment is really disincarnation. You can't be here, walking among us, being warm to the touch, breathing the same air, unless you're a human being. Humans want to eat, sleep, make love, gather possessions, raise children, and fight against death. This kind of human was Kazantzakis' 20th century Jesus.

But if you jump back a millennia to central Europe you find Jesus walking about as the mystic knight, patron and mentor for the Knights Templar, the arcane Cathars, the recondite Bogomils, and other scholars of an esoteric Christianity that would fill Europe with Gothic cathedrals and rumors of a Christ-filled Grail. Over one thousand chapels and churches would be erected by these mystic Christian knights. On June 12, 1118, Hugues de Paynes, age 48 and founder of the Knights Templar, took his vows with eight other Knights at the Castle of Arginy near Lyons in France. There they formed a brotherhood consecrated to the Christ; they would toil to protect pilgrims en route to the Holy Land of Jerusalem. Although the Knights Templar were deeply inspired by the historical if epiphanous Jesus the Christ, they worked in expectation of the millennial return of the Christ in the form of the *Parakletos*—the Comforter.

The Paraclete, a name which also suggests advocate, defender, helper, is the Christ transmuted, reappearing as the Holy Spirit who will continually testify to the cosmic glory of the Christ, who dwells eternally among the faithful, who will act as psychopomp for the initiation of the willing, who would be, in effect, the resurrected, transmogrified Jesus among them again, in a new, subtler form. Just as, many centuries earlier, the desert Essenes had labored for generations preparing the culture fit to cultivate Master Jesus once he was born, now the Knights Templar worked on behalf of the future, preparing cathedrals in the form of stone crucifixes for the Paraclete to come.

Where Jesus' cross had been a point of rapturous ascension, the cathedralic crosses would be a bed of roses, a sublime point of incarnation. "The Christ force, now accelerating the return to its Source," writes Knights Templar scholar Gaetan Delaforge in *The Templar Tradition in the Age of Aquarius* (1987), "is facilitating the entry onto the

scene of the Holy Spirit or Paraclete, which has the particular role of awakening in Man the realization of the Truth.” Jesus returns as *Consolateur*, which means “he who restores together.” As Delaforge sees it, “It suggests the coming together of the Godhead and its physical creation.”

In this union of Godhead and physical creation, a third face of Jesus is emerging: personal confidante. Stories of spontaneous Jesus encounters is to the 1990s what channeling and entity contacts were to the 1980s and what guru devotions were to the 1970s. And it’s not as if the politically mobilized and scripturally dogmatic Christian Right (the bizarrely meretricious form this pseudo-religious, philosophically fascist initiative has assumed in America) is reeling with Jesus sightings either. These seem to be reserved for the ordinary, the unassuming, the unpretending, or, as Jesus prophesied, for the humble and pure.

Nicole Gausseron, who directs *Compagnons du Partage*, a shelter for homeless men in Chartres, France, writes unaffectedly about her inner conversations with Jesus, which took place between 1985-1991. A college graduate, wife, mother, educator, devout Catholic, and social worker, she recounts her daily dialogues with Jesus in *The Little Notebook* (published in France in 1992; in America in 1995). It wasn’t cosmology, soteriology, the angelic hierarchies, or the end of the word they discussed, but rather the exigencies of faith in the real life of a contemporary European woman. Should I continue with the homeless shelter? Will the funds and equipment needed to sustain this effort somehow turn up on time? But it’s not a religious *quid pro quo*, with Jesus demanding faith in exchange for facilitation that Gausseron writes about.

The nature of authentic spiritual life, under the aegis of Jesus at this point in history, is complete freedom, explains Gausseron. Love is bestowed unconditionally. Follow the love back to Jesus and you will find no strings; most likely, you’ll find no pedantry or prescribed ways of thinking. Christianity is dead, but long live the Christ. Why me? Gausseron sensibly asks. “I have chosen you because I love you, because I

need you, Nicole, just as you are,” replies the inner Jesus. It’s as if Kazantzakis’ fleshy Jesus comes back as the inner Paraclete to counsel Gausseron in her work with the homeless. Jesus is the inner celestial patina on Gausseron’s conscience, the voice of the soul; her Jesus is the Paraclete beyond temptation yet close enough for streetwise intimacy.

It’s as if the triumph of the Pentecost is fulfilled in these individual one-on-one encounters between human soul and God soul, outside the pedagogical confines of church or dogma. Priests are redundant when pure spirits like Gausseron (our 20th century Everywoman) can receive the Christ impulse direct and while awake. In Pentecost, the apostles of Jesus were spiritually elated by the flaming touch of the Holy Spirit upon their heads; this enabled them to speak mellifluously in tongues of all languages and nuances to testify in speech to the truth of Jesus the Christ. But this was meant only as a beginning: first one man, then twelve, then all of humanity would be touched, as was Jesus initially, by this ineffable cosmic presence. “Simply leave the door of your heart open to our presence. Do what you’re doing completely and well,” Jesus counsels Gausseron.

Gausseron’s *Little Notebook* may be among the most sparely elegant accounts of direct inner encounters with Jesus, but it is by no means the only one. Commentators are calling it the Christ Encounter phenomenon. At a recent ecumenical conference of 200 people, American psychotherapist G. Scott Sparrow asked the participants to recount their most important religious experiences. Of the fifty who responded, one half described encounters with Jesus. In his new book, *I Am With You Always—True Stories of Encounters With Jesus* (1995), Sparrow recounts dozens of experiences, drawn from the testimony of everyday men and women, of revelatory meetings with Jesus.

These have to do with awakening, physical and emotional healing, consolation, initiation, spiritual instruction, and confirmation. “Taken together, these experiences raise the possibility that some people will readily accept and others will summarily dismiss,

that Christ can be experienced as directly and as personally today as when he walked the earth two thousand years ago,” writes Sparrow. He also raises a profoundly important question. “Is the person of Jesus an essential and necessary aspect of the radiant Being who manifests in the Christ encounter or only one of the many expressions of a singular Christ Being?”

Given the chance to answer personally—because religious truth is always, I believe, determined individually after long inner searching—I must say *yes* to both propositions. I would slightly rephrase the import of Sparrow’s excellent question and suggest that the many faces of Jesus—as human, mystic knight, personal confidante, in addition to the myriad of faces given him by artists, mystics, zealots, popes, heretics, sinners, and saints—represent the single unseeable face of the Christ and that when you celebrate (and adulate) these many faces of Christ, the celebration itself becomes a joyous witnessing of a Mass for Christ. Our many faces join the many faces of Jesus and sing a Mass for Christ as pure and direct and eternal as that single lilting Word that bore that face into our midst in the first place.