

Simply wanting to be with Jesus: Transfiguration, Part 2

John Dear | Feb. 20, 2007 On the Road to Peace

Before Mother Teresa founded the Missionaries of Charity, she spent 20 years teaching well-to-do secluded high school girls as a Sister of Loreto in India. Then one day, while riding the train to Darjeeling to make her annual retreat, in a moment of "intimate prayer with Jesus," as she later described it, she heard a voice tell her to leave the order and serve "the poorest of the poor." She obeyed, and for the rest of her life, she lived with that intimate prayer, served the poorest of the poor and walked with Jesus. As all the world knows, she helped tens of thousands of dying people, missioned thousands more into the life of loving discipleship and inspired millions around the globe.

Martin Sheen tells the story of visiting Mother Teresa in San Diego in the early 1990s, along with a popular motivational speaker, who at the time appeared frequently on television. This speaker was in great demand, addressing conventions and business conferences, telling people how they could become successful. He is a tall, outgoing man, and he towered over the diminutive Mother Teresa when they met.

"How did you manage to become so successful, so famous?" he asked Mother Teresa.

She looked up at him, smiled and said confidently, "Jesus."

"No, I mean, how is that you run such a huge religious institution, serve the most desperate people, travel constantly, and yet touch so many people?" he continued.

"Jesus," she said again, with a big smile.

"No, I'm asking how you do it," he persisted, still not satisfied. "How do you continue to live this life, speak to millions, win the respect of the world, and manage to be one of the greatest people in the world, even in the history of the world?"

"Jesus," Mother Teresa answered once again with a beaming smile.

The man shook his head and turned away, totally mystified. He had no idea what she was talking about.

Martin Sheen was delighted and amazed by the exchange and her childlike yet powerful answer. He thought Mother Teresa was brilliant, compelling, and entirely convincing through her simplicity and transparency, and was stunned by her reliance on the person of Jesus.

Reliance on Jesus is the heart of the Christian life. The saints testify that the key to their lives was not their great accomplishments, their terrible sufferings, their bold prophecies or even their astonishing miracles. It was Jesus. Somehow, he had touched them, invited them to follow him, and managed to walk by their side. Through his grace, they remained faithful to him, rooting everything they did in their intimate relationship with him. Their lives made sense and bore good fruit because they were centered on Jesus.

All the outstanding figures of the past century exemplify this devotion to Jesus. Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker, wrote shortly before her death in 1980 that she was grateful and lucky because "Jesus has been on my mind nearly every day of my life."

Standing alone on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tenn., at 5:50 p.m. on April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., called down to Gospel singer Ben Branch in the parking lot below, and told him to sing King's favorite hymn at the rally that evening. Just as he named the words of the hymn, "Precious Lord, take my hand," King was shot through the throat and killed.

On his way to a special evening Mass where he was assassinated on Monday, March 24, 1980, Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero stopped at the Jesuit community house in Santa Tecla, a suburb of San Salvador, to receive the sacrament of reconciliation. He told his Jesuit confessor, "I want to appear clean before the Lord."

Hindu peacemaker Mahatma Gandhi lived in a bare mud hut in his ashram in Wardha, with only one picture on the wall: a small portrait of Jesus walking on a road, with a caption that read, "He is our peace."

Flannery O'Connor began her classic novel *Wise Blood* with the observation that integrity for her meant *not* being able to get rid of the "Ragged Figure moving from tree to tree in the back of the mind."

We see reliance on Jesus in the last words of Trappist monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton in Bangkok on December 10, 1968, when he had just finished his lecture on "Marxism and Monasticism." Many of the abbots, prioresses and other monks were disturbed by the talk because it was not what they expected; they did not agree with Merton's broad vision of modern religious life. As Merton walked to his room to take an afternoon nap, one of the monks approached him and told him that a nun in the audience had been disappointed because he had said nothing about evangelization. "What we are asked to do at present," Merton said to the monk, "is not so much to speak of Christ as to let him live in us so that people may find him by feeling how he lives in us."

In 1993, while sharing a prison cell with anti-nuclear activist Philip Berrigan, who died in 2002, I discovered a piece of paper listing all the biblical names for Jesus, such as Son of God, Son of Humanity, Lamb of God, Root of Jesse, Prince of Peace, Good Shepherd, and Bread of Life. I asked Phil about it, and he explained that he was memorizing this list so he could recite the names as a mantra and call upon Jesus throughout the day to help him, sustain him and strengthen him.

These modern day saints shared an intimate knowledge of Jesus and lived in daily relationship with him. They thought about him, sought after him, and talked about him. They fashioned their lives after him and walked in his footsteps. People turned to them because they felt the presence of Jesus in their lives, words and deeds. They urged everyone to do the same. Live in relationship with Jesus, they said, and your life will be transformed and you will begin to do God's will.

Whenever I lead a retreat, I ask the participants to reflect on the presence of Jesus in their lives. "When did Jesus call you? When have you felt the presence of Jesus? Where do you feel Jesus in your life now? What is your experience of Jesus? Who is Jesus for you? What do you find attractive about the life of Jesus? Where do you see Jesus in the world? Where is he leading you? What would it look like for you to become his friend and companion? How can you deepen your relationship with Jesus? What does discipleship to Jesus mean for you?" Such questions can help open up the spiritual life and encourage us on our journey toward becoming modern day saints and apostles, friends of Jesus.

As I read the lives of saints, I notice that as they grew older, they wanted simply to be with Jesus and do God's will. Likewise, the older we get, the more dissatisfied we are with our selfish pursuits. We will want more and more to be with Jesus, to know Jesus, to love Jesus, to listen to Jesus, to follow Jesus and to do exactly what Jesus wants. With him, we feel centered, happier, and at peace. Anything can happen because Jesus walks with us. Even better, miracles will transform us and the whole world if we dare walk with him.

This is a chapter from John Dear's new book, *Transfiguration* (which features a foreword by Archbishop Tutu), published this week by Doubleday. It can be ordered at

www.amazon.com [1] or your local bookstore. John is currently on a month long national speaking tour of Australia. For information, see www.johndear.org[2]

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