

Entering God's Kingdom

By: Fr Peter Gillquist

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Most people, at one time or another, wonder if there is real meaning to life--an underlying pattern or purpose to it all. For me, that quest for meaning and purpose took place in college.

By the end of my junior year, I was ready to do a turn-around. I knew that Jesus Christ had a rightful claim on my life. And I had come to see that life apart from Him--even the enjoyable and constructive parts of life--held little meaning and satisfaction. I was into myself, out for myself, but at a point of wanting to start over.

That spring, I consciously committed my life to Christ. I acknowledged that I had shut Him out of my life, that I was honestly sorry for not following Him, and that I wanted Him to take full control of my life.

Without much realization of what it would mean, I told Him, "From here on out, I'm Yours."

The inner results of my initial repentance and belief in Christ are difficult for me to describe. While some people have very dramatic turn-arounds, others experience few or no spiritual feelings. For me, there were no lightning bolts, no shock waves. But what I did sense was a distinct new awareness of the Lord's presence, and an accompanying peace in my heart and life. A love for God and a desire to please Him--experiences left behind in childhood--were rekindled. From that point on, I had an inner desire to know God, to live in abandonment to Him, and to attain to His heavenly Kingdom.

Of course, turning to Christ is nothing new, either to people in our age or to those in ages past. The fact is, Jesus Christ has changed the lives of countless men and women over the last two thousand years. People meet Him and are never the same again. Their lives are transformed. Christ has so deeply affected His followers that millions have willingly died for Him--and counted it an honor to have done so. But why?

Who is this Man who came into the world so unobtrusively, yet can change us so drastically, take away our loneliness, forgive our sins, restore and stabilize our minds and hearts, and even take us into the very Kingdom of God?

An Incomparable Life

Often when we think about the life of Christ, we start two thousand years ago at a manger in the Middle East, with the Baby, the Wise Men, the star. While these things concern His earthly birth, His story really begins in eternity past. Because before time began, before the world was ever made, before the beginning, Christ was there. For there never was a time when He did not exist!

The first words in the Bible are, "In the beginning God . . ." (Genesis 1:1). For God was there from the start, always existing in Three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From God the Father there was begotten or born from before all time God the Son. And eternally proceeding from the Father is God the Holy Spirit.

At the creation of the human race, we find God saying, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). Note the plurality of Persons in the Godhead. Thus, from before all ages, God the Son--also called in Scripture the Word of God--reigned with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. This explains why the Gospels teach that God the Son, Jesus Christ, came to reveal the Father to us, and to send to us the Comforter, the Holy Spirit.

Throughout the history of ancient Israel, the Prophets foretold the coming of One who would be the Messiah of Israel, the Anointed One. They predicted He would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), that a sign of His coming would be that a virgin would conceive Him (Isaiah 7:14), and that He would suffer and die for the sins of the people (Isaiah 53:5, 6). There are some 300 references to His coming in the Old Testament Scriptures, all penned hundreds of years before He came.

Then, just as promised, in the fullness of time the angel appeared to a godly young Jewish virgin named Mary, and announced to her that she would bear a Son. "You shall call His name Jesus," the angel said, "for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Thus, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the humanity of Jesus Christ was formed. The Son of God became everything we are--except for sin--in order that we might become the recipients of everything He is. As Saint John writes, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). God became man to reveal Himself to us.

Most of us ask ourselves at one time or another, "Does anyone else in all the world understand me?" The Incarnation-the "infleshment"-of the Son of God answers that question once and for all-with a resounding Yes! Because Jesus Christ is fully God, He knows all things-even the number of the hairs on our heads (Luke 12:7). He created us. And because He is fully man, He is acquainted firsthand with our weaknesses, our disappointments, our sufferings. He knows about rejection, loneliness, hunger, and death because He went through them. Isaiah the Prophet wrote of Him, "Surely He has borne our grief and carried our sorrows" (Isaiah 53:4).

Taking His flesh from His Holy Mother Mary, Jesus experienced birth and growth like all of us. In His early years He knew both servitude and apprenticeship to His earthly father, Joseph, in his trade of carpentry. And He knew the higher priority of obedience and submission to His heavenly Father, on one occasion staying behind in the temple to be about His Father's business instead of accompanying Mary and Joseph back home from a trip to Jerusalem.

He went through the adolescent years-he experienced what it was like to be thirteen, fifteen-and faced head-on the opportunities for loss of temper, moral compromise, dishonesty, and rebellion present in His day. He knows about human frailty because He was tempted in every way we are, yet He never succumbed to sin.

At the age of thirty, He was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. In doing so, He not only began His own public ministry, but also forever set apart water as the means of beginning our new life in Christ through the Holy Spirit. This is why the Church, His followers here on earth, has baptized her converts in "water and the Spirit" (John 3:5). Baptism is that God-given rite of passage into the Kingdom of God whose mystic power to change us surpasses all human reason.

Throughout His three-year public ministry, Jesus Christ worked countless miracles. He healed the sick, He brought sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and help to the helpless. He stilled a storm, cast out demons, and raised the dead. All these miracles established the presence of God's Kingdom and further affirmed that He was God. Those who knew Him but a short time said, "He has done all things well" (Mark 7:37). And when pressed on specifics, even His enemies could find no fault in Him (John 19:4, 6). The daily routines of entire towns and villages were cancelled or changed when He visited. Everything, it became apparent, was subject to Him.

After three years of His ministry the Jewish religious establishment could stand no more of Him. Because He was God and said so, calls for Jesus' death began to mount. Some of His followers saw the implications and fell away. Even the disciples whom He had hand-picked faltered, one of them denying Him three times. Finally, the religious and civil authorities teamed up against Him, put Him through a sham of a trial, and crucified Him as a common criminal between two thieves. In a few hours, He was dead. No one yet understood that He had died for the entire world, carrying our sins and transgressions with Him into the grave.

Then came the culmination, the most powerful and supernatural event of all history. Three days after dying, Jesus Christ was alive again. He rose from the grave, a champion over death. Death would never touch Him again, for He cancelled out its power. And to those who are joined to Him, His promise is, "Because I live, you will live also" (John 14:19). He had forever trampled down our greatest enemy, death, by His own death. And in His Resurrection He bestows life on the living as well as upon those long dead.

For forty days after His Resurrection, Jesus opened the Scriptures to the eyes of His disciples, teaching them about His everlasting Kingdom, and commissioning them to take the gospel to the whole world. He instructed them to build His Church, the expression of His Kingdom on the earth, and fulfilled for them His promise of the Holy Spirit to accomplish the task.

To be sure, the one thing Jesus Christ left behind in this world is His Church. The Scriptures describe that Church as an assembly of His people, a new nation, a royal priesthood, a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. Because those who make up His Church share in His Resurrection, they are called the Body of Christ, and He Himself is Head.

At the end of His forty days of teaching, while His disciples stood by as witnesses, Jesus Christ ascended in His glorified body into heaven. He reigns at the right hand of His Father. As our heavenly bishop, He is Lord of His Church. In Him, Saint Paul writes, all things "consist" or are held together (Colossians 1:17).

One day Jesus Christ will return to earth again, to confront the living and the dead. All humanity will appear before His awesome and dread judgment seat. The righteous will inherit eternal life; the wicked, everlasting darkness. The Kingdom of God will be established in its fullness, and Christ will reign, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, forever.

Knowing God

Some years ago, I was speaking at Religious Emphasis Week at Washington State University. A student stepped forward with an important question. "What does it take for a person to truly become a Christian-what is the price tag for me?"

I told him that night there are two answers to his question. On the one hand, our salvation is a gift. It is freely given. There is nothing we can do to merit a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. That is what the Cross is all about. For when Jesus Christ died for us, He triumphed over the result of our sin, which is death. He died that we might live. Because of the mercy of God, we therefore read in the Scriptures that salvation is a free gift bestowed upon those who are joined to Christ.

That beloved passage, John 3:16, sums it up: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." Saint Paul reminds us, "The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Through Christ we are born from above through Holy Baptism into newness of life. We are given a fresh start in life-forgiven of all our sins, freed from the hold of evil in our lives, and filled with the Spirit of God to pursue a process of maturity in Christ. His grace to us is a gift.

But I also told my student friend there is a second answer to his question. "Let me say it as plainly as I can," I told him. "Coming to Christ will cost you everything you have. Your whole life must be changed-and keep changing-to become what He wants it to be. If you're into sexual immorality, it will cost you that. Cheating-you'll need to stop it. Drugs and drunkenness-you will need to turn from those. And if you are the sort of person who wants to withdraw from life and is not much interested in people, that will have to change as well."

You see, Jesus Christ preached one central message. It is called the gospel, the good news, and it is this: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 3:2). To repent means to turn around, to commit one's life fully to Christ, to say "Yes" to the Lord and absolutely mean it. And why are we called to this life of repentance? Because to enter God's Kingdom there is one requirement. We must be righteous. We repent because we are unrighteous-we come far short of living lives that bring glory to God.

Isn't it true, when we look at our motives and actions, we see we must be an embarrassment to God? We have basically gone our own way; we have ignored His will and commands for us; we have acted in ways that have damaged other people-some even permanently. Sometimes we turn to God in a pinch, but when things smooth out we return to doing our own thing ... and we know it.

When we first repent, we turn to the Lord Jesus Christ and tell Him we are sorry at heart for how we have lived. As undeserving sinners, we ask for His mercy and His forgiveness, and commit ourselves into His care for the rest of our lives.

Let's face it. If the Kingdom of God is worth anything, it's worth everything. We are called upon by Christ Himself to lay down everything that would keep us from entering it. That is why Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to a treasure hidden in a field. Once we realize the incredible value of that precious piece, we will sell everything we have to obtain it. This divesting of our private holdings is exactly what repentance means. We give up what we must not keep for the incomparable riches of Jesus Christ. This cost to us is the greatest bargain we can ever know.

When we turn to the Lord in this way, we begin the thrilling and adventuresome process of knowing God. Consider one Saul of Tarsus who lived in the first century. We know him better, of course, as Saint Paul,

the Apostle of Jesus Christ. Well educated under leading Jewish rabbis, the young Saul took it upon himself to persecute the early Christians at every turn. One day on the road leading to the city of Damascus, he was blinded by an overpowering light. Jesus Christ appeared to him from heaven asking, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

Having been struck to the ground, Saul uttered his prayer of repentance. "Lord, what do You want me to do?" he asked, no doubt trembling. He was instructed by Christ to go into Damascus, where he would be told what to do. Ananias the prophet met him there and confirmed his faith and repentance. Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit, healed of his blindness, and baptized (Acts 9:1-19). He went on to bring the Word of God to countless men and women.

Or consider the venerable Polycarp, who was probably baptized into Christ as an infant or young child in about A.D. 70, still in the heart of the New Testament era. He was brought up to love and serve Christ, and became the bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor just after the turn of the century. As persecutions of Christians intensified midway through the second century, Polycarp, now an old man, was given the choice of denying Christ or being burned alive. "I have served Him eighty-six years," replied Saint Polycarp, "and in no way has He dealt unjustly with me. So how can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?" (Martyrdom of Polycarp, chapter 9). Burned for his faith, Saint Polycarp is an example not of a dramatic adult conversion, but rather of a Christian privileged to live his whole life in peace and repentance.

I live in Santa Barbara, California, a city named for Saint Barbara, who lived in Nicomedia in the third century. Her father was an avowed pagan, a fanatical worshiper of idols, and he kept his daughter insulated from the outside world to keep her from contact with Christians. But in spite of it all Barbara heard the gospel of Christ, and turned to Him in Holy Baptism. When her father was told of her conversion, he marched her to the executioner's block and she was beheaded, possibly at her father's hand. Her pure and godly life, and her willingness to die for Jesus Christ, have brought great glory

to Christ throughout history.

A century later in northern Africa, another Christian woman, Monica, gave birth to a son named Augustine. Though raised in a Christian home, Augustine, like many of us, determined to ignore God and live for himself. This gifted young man pursued a life of both academic achievement and immorality, and by his mid-twenties was miserable and empty. He tells in his classic autobiography, *Confessions*, of his surrender to Jesus Christ. "You have made us for yourself, O Lord," he writes, "and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You." It was as though he came to Christ by the process of elimination. Nothing else worked. Under the guidance of his spiritual father, Ambrose, the young convert grew steadily in the grace of God. Saint Augustine went on to become a bishop in the Church and one of the most influential Christian writers and thinkers of all time.

Space does not permit us to tell of Saint Katherine of Alexandria, Saint John of Damascus, Saint Maximus the Confessor, Saints Cyril and Methodius, Saint Gregory Palamas, Saint Seraphim of Sarov, and the hosts of others who lived their lives under the lordship of Christ as fellow heirs of His Kingdom.

Besides their love for Christ, there is at least one other vital characteristic these people held in common. They all grew to know God and serve Him in the Church. This stands in stark contrast to much of what is taught today under the guise of Christianity. Tragically, some who still use His name have so willfully departed from the path Christ set forth and those heroes and heroines of the Faith followed, that they have made knowing God nearly impossible.

This, coupled with the churchless Christ of televangelism, has prompted people who sincerely desire to serve the Lord to try to make it on their own. But this option works no better.

Let me illustrate. Suppose you take a trip to Cairo, Egypt. You're sitting one afternoon at a table in a crowded sidewalk cafe having tea. A young man walks up and, with a heavy accent, asks to join you. A bit surprised, you invite him to sit down. You discover his name is Wong Lee, and he is an outspoken communist from China who is in Cairo for a brief summer tour.

Wong Lee asks you to tell him something about life in America, including what it's like to live in a democracy. You begin by talking about various opportunities in the business world, the possibility of owning property. Then you move on to the political arena, voting and the electoral process. You tell him about the checks and balances of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the federal government and something of how state and local governments work as well. You're honest about the shortcomings of the system, too, and start to wrap up your remarks about the essential freedoms under a democracy.

But before you can finish, Lee interrupts.

"That's it!" he exclaims with the first real excitement of the afternoon in his voice. "This is what I want!"

"What do you mean?" you ask, bewildered.

"I mean, I want to embrace democracy! It's better than what we have as communists. Far better. Right now at this moment, I am telling you I am committing myself to democracy!"

You're stunned. You've never seen anything like this in your life. Half an hour ago, you barely knew this man. Now you have a new convert to democracy on your hands. You collect your thoughts for a minute, and then begin to offer some direction.

"Well, let's see, Lee. This is going to mean that we'll have to make arrangements to bring you into the country and make you an American citizen."

"What do you mean?" Lee asks. "Why should I move?"

"So you can live out your life under a democracy, so you can experience this freedom and opportunity," you explain.

"But my home is in Beijing," Lee retorts. "I have no intention of moving away from there. I'll study about democracy and learn on my own. I will memorize the Constitution and learn the Bill of Rights. And I can subscribe to the Congressional Record."

Your heart sinks. What he's saying will not work, and you know it won't work. How can anyone be committed to democracy and be perfectly satisfied to remain living under communism? It's impossible. But you can't get Lee to understand. He's into democracy merely on a mental level, and it will do him little or no good.

Such and worse is the plight of those who try to follow Christ-even zealously-but apart from the Church. They may be sincere, but they will never really get to know Him out there. For one must live within the Body of Christ, be fed by her

sacraments, be instructed in her true Faith, and worship at her altar to attain the godliness and righteousness that lead to the Kingdom's open doors.

Coming to Christ and to His Church

For two thousand years, the Orthodox Christian Church has held intact the fullness of Christ that we have discussed here. She has maintained this Faith in the face of almost indescribable persecution and suffering. Within the gates of Orthodox Christianity is the totality of the New Testament Faith, the Apostolic Church.

By the mercy of God, this Faith has never been reduced or diminished. Nor has it been added to or altered. The Orthodox Church is that one place, that zone of safety, if you will, where the God of the Scriptures-Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--can be fully known, loved, and worshiped.

One of the great Fathers of Orthodoxy is Saint John Chrysostom, a Bible teacher and preacher of the fourth century who has brought and still brings thousands of people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ through his writings. Whenever this man encountered a person who wanted to commit himself to Christ and learn to know Him, Saint John would agree to instruct him in the Orthodox Faith, after which would come Holy Baptism and the anointing with oil to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

But before the actual instruction was begun, the godly pastor would offer a prayer of enrollment by which the person was entrusted to Jesus Christ as his Lord and King.

This prayer is still used today at the opening of the Orthodox service of baptism. Look carefully at how it begins:

"In Your Name, O Lord, God of truth, And in the Name
of Your Only-begotten Son, And of your Holy Spirit,
I lay my hands upon your servant, Who has been found worthy
to flee to your Holy Name And to take refuge
under the shelter of Your wings."

Let me ask you a sincere question. Are you willing to flee to Jesus Christ for protection in His Holy Church, to learn to know Him, to be cleansed and changed? If so, a new life in Christ lies ahead for you. Your next step is to get to know an Orthodox priest in your area who can guide you through a time of preparation and instruction in the Christian Faith, and then union with Christ in Holy Baptism.

Ask the person who offered you this booklet to put you in touch with a priest. Or check the Yellow Pages of the phone book under "Orthodox" or "Eastern Orthodox," and call for an appointment to visit. Or you may write to us at Conciliar Press, P.O. Box 76, Ben Lomond, CA 95005, and we will try to refer you to an Orthodox Church near your home.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). Determine to follow Jesus Christ and learn to walk with Him on that path which leads to the knowledge of God. For Jesus Christ has promised, "The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out" (John 6:37). The door has been opened to you, and He will receive you as His disciple.