1. Jesus

"I wasn't there so I can't say He didn't," The Misfit said. "I wisht I had of been there," he said, hitting the ground with his fist. "It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of known. Listen lady," he said in a high voice, "if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now."

—Flannery O'Connor, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*

This passage from O'Connor's short story is a good place to start our reflection on the name of Jesus and why the Morning Offering invokes his name in its first breath. There is usually in the life of a believer, at one time or another, a glance toward the voices of doubt as they rise and fall in volume like a conversation on the edge of a great darkness—a glance perhaps, but never a nod. Though the circumstances change over time, ideologies that restrict all reality to human measure tend to follow the same well-worn paths.

Nevertheless, the Misfit in this story, a serial killer who has his men shoot a whole family to obtain a getaway car, does ask some potent questions: Why wasn't the Lord's Resurrection witnessed by all of Jerusalem? Why weren't we there when Lazarus was raised? If we witnessed a miracle, then we wouldn't need this thing called faith. We'd know and

be different from what we are now. Even if we aren't killers, that can sound like an awfully good deal.

Would the Misfit really have been different had he seen a miracle of Our Lord's? The question isn't really answerable, of course, but the odds are against it. He is a murderer who seeks to evade responsibility, and when it comes to handing the blame for his life to someone else, Jesus is as convenient a figure as anyone. For many did see, with their own eyes, Lazarus stumble out of his grave at the command of Jesus. Many more saw Lazarus, alive, after his burial. And what was their reaction? The number of disciples grew. Yet the number of Pharisees who wanted to kill Jesus because of this miracle also grew (Jn 11:53).

Here is proof that though the life of faith involves both heart and intellect, how often the heart has the trump card: for it shows what we love. In the Incarnation, truth reveals itself in the person of Jesus. Truth in this way greets us with a face at once recognizable and utterly mysterious. We meet in Jesus not a concept or a theory but a person who is Lord of all that is.

Seeking Christ, therefore, is different from seeking anyone else: the harvest of our efforts depends, in the end, on our willingness to allow truth's splendor to cast its light within us. When we seek primarily ourselves, our light—our guiding star, so to speak—becomes darkness. Even amid advanced technological cultures, one may be blind to the way that leads to Christ. Thus the "lamp" of the person's choosing becomes "light" only when the innermost core of that person lies open to what is, even at the risk of suffering (Mt 6:23). This is why God's "weakness" is stronger than humanity: it shows, with divine rigor, what each of us is in our innermost being.

Blessed John Henry Newman makes this aspect of believing especially clear in his sermon "Faith and Reason, Contrasted as Habits of Mind," preached when he was an Anglican, on the Feast of the Epiphany, in 1839. In this eloquent meditation on the "home" of Faith, which is the "heart

itself," Newman explores the various ways that Faith is either embraced or rejected by the individual when a miracle is presented to the senses. To those who think belief or unbelief simply a natural matter, unconnected to our moral being, Newman forcefully objects: "But a man *is* responsible for his faith, because he is responsible for his likings and dislikings, his hopes and his opinions, on all of which his faith depends."[1]

This brings us to a paradox: Faith in Jesus Christ is at once mediated and the most intimate of relationships. Though Christ touches each soul directly in the life of Faith and especially in the Eucharist, Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard reminds us about "the universal law laid down by Providence" that it is through others—principally, the Church, of course—that we find the way to salvation.[2] This should not surprise us. If we would know any history, we must establish reliable records from the past. If we would benefit from the medicines invented by geniuses, we have to have a reasonable trust in their expertise. How much more, then, does the search for the Lord demand more than our own personal resources, no matter how richly gifted they might be?

The Misfit in O'Connor's story, as we have seen, completely misunderstands the nature of faith. He thinks seeing would conquer all doubts. But this is not true. Just as the Pharisees were incensed over the miracle of Lazarus's rising from the tomb, so we are told that some of the apostles were, at least initially, "doubtful" when the risen Lord appeared to them on the mountain (Mt 28:17). There is no getting around the heart and its openness or hostility to faith.

By his very nature, the Lord God outstrips our capacity for grasping shreds of certainty too small for his infinite being. But because of the Incarnation, this same God has drawn close and can be known by Faith, itself a journey that will only end in the unendingness of eternal life. Roch Kereszty rightly singles out the Apostle John for being the first to see the risen Christ when the apostles were on the sea

of Tiberias: "His faith makes him sharp-sighted."[3] Moreover, as Aquinas points out, there is no certainty greater than Faith because Faith is based on the authority of Almighty God, who cannot deceive or be deceived.[4]

Kereszty notes this perennial characteristic of Christ: "He has become the sign of contradiction from his birth to our own day. No one who studies his life and teaching can maintain a credibly indifferent posture."[5] The richness of his being—both God and man, bringer of peace and division, the Word made flesh, and eternal reason speaking with a Galilean accent—demands a response that is total. Scholarly diffidence, skeptical urbanity, and humanistic appreciation all miss the nature of his claim, and hence also miss him entirely.

Part of the reality of faith in Christ originates in the nature of the human person. We are beings who can know, who can trust, and who can be faithful to a divine promise. Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz has observed that there are two dramatically different ways to see the human person: either as a thinking offshoot of a piece of cosmic mold or as a cathedral.[6]

Those who hold to the former ironically don't realize that mold, no matter how advanced, cannot entertain cosmological theories. The cathedral image, of course, is deeply consonant with the riches of interiority open to even the humblest person. It is reminiscent of the Christian idea of the individual believer as "a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 6:19). This interior life may be rich and luminous, or darkened with sin and self-love, "bare ruined choirs," hungering for a new sensation or experience to ease the pain of often self-inflicted inner poverty.

The first breath of our Morning Offering rightly belongs to Our Lord, and it does so primarily in regard to his priesthood. He is not merely an exalted model for future human endeavors, or just a rich personality such as Socrates who engages our thought with his own particular human

brilliance. He is the eternal Word, incarnate of the Virgin Mary, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.

In an essay published in *Communio* in 1990, Benedict XVI gives us something of a preview of his later, three-volume *Jesus of Nazareth*. In both works, Benedict outlines a broad but profound understanding of Christ as the culmination of God's exodus, of the leading out of fallen humanity from sin and death. In taking hold of this liberation, one must be able to allow Christ to unfold, as it were, in his human and divine reality: one must have the openness to the past, with an ability to hear its promises as they are voiced anew today. As well, one must recognize the incursion of the eternal into our lives with its ability to speak a word that remains valid for all time. As Benedict reminds us, echoing St. Paul, Christ is "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8).

In this way, Christ is not diminished according to our preconceived ideas. Benedict dismisses any "following" of Christ's way that does not include the way of the Cross: "No, the call to following concerns not just some human program, or the human virtues of Jesus, but his *entire* way, 'through the curtain' (Heb 10:20). What is essential and new about the way of Jesus Christ is that he opens *this* way for us, for only thus do we come into freedom. The meaning of 'following' is to enter into communion with God."[7]

That curtain is "his flesh." The way of discipleship involves at its core a following of Jesus' flesh on the Cross, a dying to self, and a consequent rising up in the grace of the paschal mystery. This includes the sacramental life, with its simplicity, humility, and depthless intimacy that will only blossom in eternity when the pilgrim Church becomes transfigured into "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rv 21:1), and "death shall be no more" (Rv 21:4).

When our first parents failed to grasp the gift of each moment streaming from God's goodness, in pride they chose the lie that their dependence on that goodness was somehow demeaning to their dignity. The images of the visible

world ever since then have lulled us into believing that a finite good—something created—can satisfy our yearning for truth, for happiness, and for God.

Whom do we see when we look at Jesus Christ? He who sees Christ, writes Benedict, sees "the Father, and the entire trinitarian mystery. For we must add, when one sees the Father in Christ, then in him the veil of the temple is truly rent, and the interior of God is laid bare. For then the one and only God is visible not as a monad, but as Trinity. Then man truly becomes a friend, initiated into the innermost mystery of God."[8]

When we look to Christ, we see something both conceivable (for it happened) and inconceivable by human reason alone. Yet in this, we also see the mystery of our personhood illuminated in a light without ending. Here, in a passage that St. John Paul II loved to reference, is the unfailing source of human dignity and freedom: "The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear. It is not surprising, then, that in Him all the aforementioned truths find their root and attain their crown."[9] Notice how John Paul finds this crown not on humanity but on Christ, the Alpha and Omega, God's eternal Word made man, the new Adam. What started on a quiet Sunday morning—though foreseen from eternity—offers us now a new life of grace, rooted and perfected in God's very life.

Bending our knee before the Lord of heaven and earth, we see here one greater than any prophet, one whom Solomon, at the height of his wisdom, would have given kingdoms to see. But we see him with the eyes of faith. Better yet, "we have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16) when we live by his Spirit.

A Morning Prayer

So having seen the hurdles of errant reason as little more than mirages, designed to confuse, I find you, Lord. In a world where knowledge has become data, steaming in the invisible jungles of chatter in which we move, forget, and have our being, you await us, patient for more than twenty centuries. In my insufficiency, the very nature of which I at times so dread, I find you.

You answer my yearning for the reason of my existence better than a spring of cool water can quench agonizing thirst. My soul (a tangled, tattered garment, once wedding white, now sometimes unrecognizable by my own chosen self-damage) is given by your grace the thrilling flutter of repose; it is a maple tree on an October day, alive to its own beautiful dying and relishing the transformation that will bring me to a sky of unending adoration before your face.

You bestow the gift of yourself on all who seek you and are fired from within by your holiness; this holiness which touched the ineffably bright eternity of its goodness and let time and space rollick outward into days unending, days that are the seedbed of souls you take to yourself. O Jesus, what true joy does not sing your name?

You walk with me through my poor man's dying into your warm embrace, waiting from all eternity. This is not the blank eternity of impersonality but the "heart's embrace" of the Father's eternal love of his Son, endlessly taken up by the Holy Spirit in the contemplation of the love that gives without loss, that loves without passion, that fills without satiation, and that blooms galaxies and tulips simply because you are good without end, beautiful beyond my heart's deepest longing.

Your love fills my heart with sentiments of love and devotion, and inspires my will to acts of self-sacrifice that find no natural explanation, heartened by centuries of self-abnegation and lifetimes of quiet self-sacrifice, alongside the

glorious, torch-like charity of countless martyrs. You fill me with not only sentiments but also virtues, infused strengths that adorn the soul like gems lit with heaven's fire.

You meet us in the solemn proclamation of your gospels, handed down by our mother the Church like a string of pearls, formed in the dark hours of martyrdom and luminous with an unearthly light. We meet you in the breathing icon of your very self, each soul conceived in your image.

You meet us, above all, in the liturgical renewal of your total victory on Mount Calvary, Holy Mass. Here, in the *fons et culmen*, the source and summit of the Christian's life according to the Second Vatican Council, we find you in the sweetness, wisdom, and chaste beauty of your bride, the Church. Whether offered at High Mass at Chartres Cathedral or in a prison cell, you would have us join you on Calvary, all our sufferings now yours, all our offerings now yours, and your triumph now ours—in hope, so we may, in eternity, become "sharers" in your "divinity."[10]

You have not left us, either: "Lo, I am with you always" (Mt 28:20). With Blessed Newman, we watch the tabernacle light with undimmed hope: "Nothing moves there but the distant glimmering Lamp which betokens the Presence of our Undying Life, hidden yet ever working."[11]

Approaching the Mystery

Here is the *mysterium fidei* by which we live. Nothing, perhaps, gives more of what Newman called a sense of objective reality to Catholicism than this faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. It is chiefly this manner of his presence, masked by the appearances of the food of the poor, which can break open the heart of the proud when they kneel before him, the Lord of all. Others may entertain theories about the deity; we will come and adore him. Jesus has become small so we may draw close and speak with him words addressed to no

other as we partake of that conversation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that is the heart of prayer.

This God now has a name always new. Above all other names, it is the only name under heaven that can save us (Acts 4:12). We speak it with reverence and with the same breath that we offer to him this day.