

FORMING A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS

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INTRODUCTION

Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?

This is not a common question among Catholics. It is, however, very familiar to a wide variety of Protestant Christians. It is often asked of people they meet or come to know. Catholics hesitate as to how to answer, as we seldom express our faith in Jesus in terms of a personal relationship. That, however, does not mean that for Catholics their faith in Jesus is not personal. For believing and practicing Catholics faith in Jesus is very personal, both in regard to him and in regard to how we conduct our personal lives because of him. Having said this, I would suggest that there are some very good reasons why Catholics should make the effort to frame our faith in Jesus in terms of a personal relationship, and to equip ourselves to be able to offer a answer to the question, "Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?" Doing so can significantly open up the power of our faith to transform our entire relational life, not only with God but with others. It also allows us specific ways in which we can be vigilant over the health of our relationship with God and with others.

Why God became Human in Jesus

Too often we frame our understanding of the coming of Jesus in terms of having to perform a task: to suffer, to die on the cross, to redeem us, to open again for us the way to Heaven. All of these things are true. They are, in fact, what Jesus did and are important tasks he accomplished. But these things, taken individually, and even collectively, do not yet get at a more fundamental reason for God's incarnation in Jesus. It was for God, in person, to invite us to a human relationship with Himself, a relationship God intended for us to have with Him in the beginning, when God fashioned man and woman in His image. It is hard even to conceive how a human being, on his own initiative, would go about forming a human relationship with the eternal God, the transcendent Origin of All Existence, the One whose presence spans the known universe and beyond, and interfaces with each thing in such a way as to keep it in existence and unfold its potential. No, if God is to have a human relationship with us, God would have to "come down to our level" -- we have no way of rising up to His. Even if somehow we could, would we even know what we were looking at? God is God, not us, and God makes this crystal clear:

*My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways,
my thoughts higher than your thoughts. Isaiah 55:8-9*

God is infinitely different than us. The truth about God is larger than any concept we could form of God with our imagination, or any conclusion about God we could come to with our limited powers of reasoning alone. Any time human being have tried, we fell short of the truth, and often end up actually coming to conclusions that contradicts the truth about God. God, in Jesus, comes to us, reveals Himself to us, and offers us a human relationship with Himself.

The possibilities of a personal relationship with Jesus were not limited to the span of Jesus' earthly life. Jesus rose precisely to take his place, as God and Savior, at the side of every man and woman throughout time. He is with each of us and we are all invited to come to know him personally. The personal presence of Jesus with us is the resounding theme of Catholic Faith. Jesus is present with us at Mass creating the Church by personally "membering" each of us to himself and to one another as members of his body. Jesus is present to us at our side as we walk

through each day and encounter each moment in it. The essential foundation of a Catholic's Faith is the establishment of a strong personal relationship with our Savior. Catholics use the word, "communion," to describe this relationship. We speak of living in communion with Jesus.

Personal Relationship is Personal Relationship

People, especially religious people, usually just assume that there is one set of rules and pattern of behavior for relationship with God, and another for relationship with our fellow human beings. This is not true. To embrace this assumption and act on it muddles our understanding of the dynamics of human relationship and our ability to fashion a coherent relational world for ourselves. Relationship is relationship, whether it be relationship with a spouse, a sibling, a family member, a good friend, a trusted colleague or a relationship with God. The dynamics are the same. The requirements are the same. Hence, if you get good at relationship with God, you will simultaneously equip yourself to establish good relationships with others.

Where, exactly, is Jesus?

Once again, the popular assumption is that Jesus came to accomplish certain tasks and, having completed them, he rose and ascended into Heaven, where he is now located at the right hand of the Father. Once again these things are true but the question needs to be asked, "Where is Heaven" and where is "the right hand of the Father?" Are these temporal places or are they modes of presence? We tend to think about eternity in this world's spacial terms, like the top of Mt. Everest or downtown Detroit. We conclude that Heaven and the right hand of the Father are places at a distance from other places. They are not! The Jesus we believe in is more than just a historical figure, and more than just a remote presence that lives somewhere far off "in heaven." The Jesus we believe in is risen and dwells among us. Jesus rose to take his place next to us – next to each of us. This is something he was not able to do when he was living in Nazareth and preaching in Judea and Galilee. He could only get to one place at a time with his physical body. His mission, however, was to all of us – who would come to be throughout time. He rose and the Gospels tell us he assumed a new body, a body fit for Heaven: one capable of being present simultaneously in a multitude of places. Jesus is present with each of us and invites us to a personal relationship with himself. This calls for a personal response from us.

Establishing a Strong Personal Relationship with Jesus

Think about relationships for a moment. Our relationship with someone is established by contact and strengthened by the frequency and ways in which we interact with them. The people we interact with the most are those who most influence and often determine our own attitudes, words and actions. If we are consistent in our interaction with someone, we "take on" their attitude and patterns of behaving.

There are the Four Exercises that Build and Sustain a Personal Relationship with Jesus:

1. Getting to Know Jesus and Listening to Him
2. Walking and Talking to Jesus
3. Drawing Strength from Jesus to Love the Right Way
4. Looking in the Mirror with Jesus

FOUR STEPS TO FORMING A PERSONAL REALTIONSHIP WITH JESUS

Step #1

Getting to Know Jesus and Listening to Him

The first step in a personal relationship is to take the time and make the effort get to know the other person. You ask them questions like: Where do you work? Where do you live? What kind of hobbies do you have? What are your interests? You listen to what they say and watch what they do to learn how they think and how they feel. The more you do this, the more intimate and personal the relationship becomes. When you stop doing it your relationship with your wife, a friend or a colleague recedes. You grow distant from each other. Why? Because you are a living being! Your lifespan is a journey of *becoming*. You are not the same person you were a year ago or even a week ago. You constantly change. If you haven't done anything to connect with someone in a year or even a week, you lose contact with who they are! You have to work at a relationship if it is to stay alive and effectively influence your life.

For just a moment, set aside what you think or have heard about Jesus. Ask yourself:

How much of what Jesus actually said do I know?

How accurately can I describe Jesus' feelings?

The priest's job is not "to know this for you." Your priest "speaks" to your personal knowledge of Jesus. So, how do you go about "knowing Jesus?" It's not difficult. In fact, it is quite simple.

Getting to Know Jesus and Listening to Him requires that you set aside a time devoted to Him. The good news is that it requires no more than ten minutes a day. During this time you read a small portion of the Gospel (Matthew, Mark, Luke or John). If you are just getting started, I encourage you to read the Gospel of Mark, beginning with chapter one, verse one. The Bible is conveniently divided into short passages with bold headings, each describing one moment or event in the life of Jesus. The next day read the short passage next in order. In this way you will accompany Jesus through the entire Gospel. After reading the passage, pause in reflection by asking a couple of questions:

What was Jesus thinking or feeling?

What did I learn about Jesus from reading this?

What did Jesus do or say that showed me

something about the world or how I should live?

Finish by forming a small prayer spoken silently in your heart to Jesus, based upon what you just read about him. For example: "Jesus, help me to show a little more compassion." or "Jesus, I really need your patience."

Step #2

Walking and Talking to Jesus

The first step in a relationship leads to the second. To form a relationship with someone you have to also be ready to walk with them. What does that mean? It means to do something with them, to share an experience with them, to perform a task or create something together.

To walk with someone also means to follow their course through life, to track and personally share in their experiences: their movements forward, their moments of faltering, their joys and

their sorrows, their hopes and their dreams, and the roadblocks they encounter. This is what Jesus invites *you* to do *with him* in Step One of your relationship with him. Now this is what *he* wants to do *with you* in Step Two.

Walking and talking to Jesus takes place throughout your day. It requires that you simply pause often during the day for a few seconds of deliberate attention. It is done as you move from one task to another or at times you naturally pause in the course of your day. In these few seconds you make conscious contact with Jesus by silently saying this simple prayer:

**“Jesus, be with me.
Help me to see the good I can do
and give me the strength to do it.”**

You should pray this knowing that the good Jesus helps you see may not always be what you want to do or say, or were even thinking about doing or saying. But isn't that's the point? Are you acting *in relationship with him* or are you acting *on your own*? Another way of saying this is: Are you acting in communion with Jesus or are you acting independently? There is a big difference between the two. If you are acting in communion with him you will be seeing with two sets of eyes, your own and his, thinking with two minds, feeling with two hearts, and acting with the strength of two. It was Jesus who personally invited you to act in communion with him:

*Come to my all you who are weary
and find life burdensome, and I shall refresh you.
Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me.
Matthew 11:29*

Walking and talking to Jesus is what “yoking” yourself to him means. It is something you have to take the initiative to do personally. He is always present and ready to respond. This is living “in communion” with Jesus. You might want to memorize the Bible verse above as a treasured, personal invitation from your Savior. As Catholics we take Jesus seriously when he says:

*I am the vine, you are the branches.
Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear
much fruit, because without me you can do nothing.
John 15:5*

Step #3 Drawing Strength from Jesus to Love the Right way

The third step in forming a personal relationship with Jesus it to answer his summons to gather with him and your fellow Christians at Mass. Step One takes place in your home when you open the Gospels and read the words and deeds of the Lord. Step Two takes place when you walk with Jesus during your day. Step Three takes place at Mass. This makes it uniquely Catholic. At the Consecration of the Mass Jesus says to you: “*This is my body which will be given up for you...*” and “*This is the chalice of my blood which will be poured out for you...*” It is important to be intentionally present to Jesus and to what he is saying to you at this moment. Jesus died for you. At this sacred moment Jesus is offering his life to live in you. Explicitly ask for His strength to pass into you. Pray a short but heart-felt mental prayer in these or similar words:

**“Jesus, I need your strength to love others in the way
you love me. Help me to die to myself to give life to them.**

Striving to love the right way by dying to self to give life to others, overcomes self absorption and patterns of self-centeredness. This happens in communion with Jesus as you give your life for the life of others in small and large ways each day.

Why here, at Mass? Why not just alone when you are in prayer or while you are walking with Jesus through your day? The reason is profound and important. The gospels show us clearly that Jesus did not have *exclusive*, relationships with anyone. We seldom even hear of his being alone with someone, apart from the twelve. The Gospels always describe Jesus being with and moving around with the twelve and others of his company. His one-on-one personal relationships with each of his disciples *were open to and serving of his* relationship with all of his disciples. At Mass, Jesus pours his strength into his disciples, gathered together, around him (even throughout the world). The strength he pours into you at Mass is not all for you. Some of it is for your brothers and sisters in the faith. When they grow weary they will find strength in you. When they are disoriented, they will find new focus in your example. At Mass, Jesus' personal relationship with you opens outward to be available and serve any of your sisters or brothers in Christ. This is very different from what often happens in one-on-one personal relationships in the world. Exclusive relationships in the world often draw their identity as much from who is *excluded* from the relationship, as they do from the two (or more) that are included. Exclusive personal relationships often bring us to harboring resentment and disdain for those outside the relationship and even prompt gossip and ridicule of them. There is no, "Just Jesus and Me," in a healthy personal relationship with Christ. This easily leads to self-righteousness towards those outside the relationship. In a true personal relationship with Jesus there is only "Jesus and me, and our relationship open to serving all." If you want a true personal relationship with Jesus it is vitally important that you attend Mass and participate with focused attention. The deeper your relationship with Jesus, the more confident you are and the more your relationship with him is open to the encouragement and service of others in their relationship with him.

Jesus' words at Mass also define what love means for his disciples: I die to myself to give life to others. We cannot long sustain that kind of love without his strength, without his very life living within us. Gathered with Jesus and our sisters and brothers at Mass, Jesus offers it to us. Resolutions and promises won't work. Only a decision to grasp firmly a strength greater than your own. Jesus' way of loving is the only path to peace of mind, the only way to finding meaning and purpose in your life, and the only way to achieve the personal fulfillment that endures unto eternal life. The deepest joy of your personal relationship with Jesus is your awareness of Him loving others through you and with you. These ancient words were spoken of *both* Jesus and you:

I have called you for the victory of justice.

I have grasped you by the hand.

I formed you, and set you as...a light to the nations. Isaiah 42:6

Step #4 **Looking in the Mirror with Jesus**

In any strong personal relationship two people form a bond of accountability with one another. They hold each other accountable to be true to their best self. One important reason for establishing a personal relationship with Jesus is because we catch sight of our "best self" in him.

Getting to know Jesus, walking and talking with him, drawing strength from him we see more and more clearly in him the kind of human being we were created to be. Saint Paul

tells us

Those (God) foreknew God also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that (Jesus) might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. Romans 8:29

Another reason why God became flesh in Jesus is that humanity had completely lost sight of who we were created to be. The Bible says, *“In his light we see the light. Psalm 36:9*

Looking in the Mirror with Jesus should take place once a week. Pick a day that seems most suitable to you. You will need only five minutes after your daily reading of the Gospel passage (Step One). Imagine Jesus standing next to you. Both of you are looking into a mirror. Notice the contrast between yourself and Jesus. Compare your attitude with Jesus’ attitude, your words with his, your actions with his. Identify where they differ. Identify one or two things that you need to change in order to grow more like Jesus. This isn’t an exercise in guilt and shame. It is an exercise in motivation. The most intimate joy and duty of a deep personal relationship is to what your friend to catch sight of his or her best self in you and to want to bring out the best in your friend. Jesus does that for you. He says:

I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father. It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain...
John 15:15-16

Jesus isn’t standing in front of you as your judge; he stands next to you, just as he walks next to you, as your model, your trusted mentor and your coach.

Take one or two things you noticed fell short of Jesus’ attitude, words or actions and, the next morning, standing in front of the mirror in your bedroom or bathroom, and say quietly:

**“Jesus, our goal today is:
(e.g. to change how I talk to people)”**

Repeat this brief exercise in the mirror for a couple days. When you set a goal with Jesus at the beginning of the day, the day becomes focused and oriented to growth in virtue. If you don’t do this exercise, your day will become oriented to something else that happens to intrude upon you during the course of the day, often something that brings you down. Remember, you are not facing yourself alone. You are facing yourself with your Savior at your side. His question never is, “What are you going to do about this?” It is always, “What are we going to do about this?...Let’s get going!” An unexamined life is a life that experiences no personal growth.

When you were baptized, Jesus said to you:

“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.”
Matthew 5:13

Salt draws out the flavor of food. It allows a meat or a vegetable dish to unfold its full potential for flavor. This is delightful and a blessing for the person eating it. The parallel with personal relationship is pretty clear. A personal relationship draws out the full flavor and potential for the good in each. Jesus is “salt” for you, and you become “salt for the earth,” an encouraging

inspiration and blessing to everyone and everything you have a relationship with. Step Four disposes you to be open to the use and the power of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession). It orients you to its reception.

HOW THE APOSTLES FORMED A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS

Let's take a look at how the apostles established a personal relationship with Jesus.

As he was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter, and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the sea; they were fishermen. He said to them, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him. He walked along from there and saw two other brothers, James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They were in a boat, with their father Zebedee, mending their nets. He called them, and immediately they left their boat and their father and followed him. Matthew 4:18-22

The Gospel says that one day Jesus took a walk along the shore of the sea at Capernaum and he came upon Peter, Andrew, James, and John. He called them and they dropped everything and followed him. Does this sound reasonable to you? If Jesus was unknown to them and just came up and said, "Follow me," why would they? If a stranger comes along in his car while you're mowing your lawn and says, "Come follow me," are you going to get into his car and drive away with him? We sense that something is missing here. It is, and if we go back to the Gospels they tell us that Jesus left Nazareth, where he had been raised, and moved to Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 4:13). The Gospels also tell us that Jesus had a house in Capernaum, and that he welcomed people to gather in his home (Mark 2:1), where he spoke to them. As a matter of fact, the Gospels tell us that people gathered there in so great a number that often you couldn't get past the door, like the four men who brought their crippled friend to Jesus and had to lower him in front of Jesus through the roof of the room where he was teaching (Luke 5:17-39). Is it not reasonable to assume that Peter, Andrew, James and John at some time or other came to Jesus' house to hear him speak? Everyone was talking about Jesus and the healings he was performing. From what the Gospels tell us about Peter (John 18:15-16), I see him standing at the door and leaning in to listen to Jesus. My point is that it is highly likely that Peter, Andrew, James and John had already taken the first step in forming a personal relationship with Jesus: they took the time to listen to him. They got a sense of his feelings and began to understand something of his mind. As they gathered with others at Jesus' home over those days and weeks, something began to resonate within them. They sensed Jesus speaking to them, personally. Jesus' words touched a personal place in each of them. His words made a connection with their real lives. So, the first step of a personal relationship with Jesus had already begun to take place before Jesus found them on the shore mending their nets. Further, I don't think that Jesus just accidentally bumped into them that day on the shore. I think he went looking for them. He paused in front of them and extended an invitation to take the next step in a relationship with him: "Come, follow me" – walk with me! They were ready to respond.

As the first step had started to establish the relationship, now the second step will allow it to grow. It will grow as they walk with Jesus over the next three years. As a matter of fact, it will go on after his resurrection for the rest of their lives, in a way they could not yet imagine. As Jesus walked with them he continually, both in his words and actions, pointed out to them the good in the moment that wanted doing. Notice in your reading of the Gospel that Jesus moves with the twelve and not only points out the good that need to be done, but he does something about it. These are the miracles of healing and release from bondage that take place constantly. Miraculous power flows out from Jesus to do the good: to heal, to restore, to set free.

As Jesus journeys about with his disciples they stop along the way. In those moments, perhaps at the end of the day or while eating a meal together, the disciples had the opportunity to gaze at Jesus and think about him as a man. It might be something he had done or the manner in which he had engaged someone. They, like us, could not help comparing their manner of being with his. How often did they find that they came up short of the kind of man they saw in Jesus? In one of these moments Peter verbalizes his thoughts, and says: *Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man. (Luke 5:8)* Sometimes Jesus had to take the initiative and chide his disciples into self-examination. He said: *Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?(Luke 6:46)* While discussing among themselves who was the greatest, Jesus even breaks in and says: *The Son of man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)* In these moments the apostles were drawn to examine themselves in light of the man Jesus was. This awakened in them a desire to become a better human being. In the Gospels we can see the apostles exercising the fourth step in forming a personal relationship with Jesus.

Despite their best intentions and many efforts, Peter, Andrew, James and John (and the rest of the apostles) came up short of becoming the man they saw in Jesus. They couldn't do it. They didn't have it in them. At the Last Supper Jesus established the context for exercising the third step in forming a personal relationship with him. He summoned his apostles to himself and gave them his flesh to eat and his blood to drink, his very life to live within them. In communion with him they would exercise the full potential of their humanity through him, with him and in him. By receiving communion with him, they also became flesh of each other's flesh (Jesus' flesh) and blood of each other's blood (Jesus' blood). His life in each of them was given for the support of the life of each other. In this their unity became complete. (John 17:23) He tells them they must: *Do this in remembrance of me.*

Now, think about your own relationship with Jesus. The first step doesn't take place Capernaum, listening in at the door of Jesus' house. It takes place in your own home when you open your bible and read the Gospel accounts of his words and deeds. You hear his words, you notice what he does and how he does it, and you turn over his words and deeds in your mind. His words find resonance within you. They "speak" to your own life and experiences. You establish the first step of a personal relationship with Jesus, just as Peter, Andrew, James, and John did. Like them you are invited to take the second step. You begin to walk with Jesus. You move through your day and, pausing periodically, you pray simply from within: "Jesus, you are with me, show me the good I can do here. Give me the strength to do it." This parallels exactly what Peter, Andrew, James and John were doing when they walked with Jesus on the roads of Galilee and the streets of Jerusalem. You take the third step when you worship at Mass. You receive from

him his life to live in you for the life of others. The bond of your relationship becomes profoundly deep. You take the fourth step when you make time to reflect and examine yourself in light of his presence and example, and set goals for growth in holiness. This corresponds to what Peter, Andrew, James and John did in the upper room at the Last Supper, and in those quiet moments with Jesus in the evenings as they traveled about in his company.

The Gospel Storey Continues with Us

What happened to Peter, Andrew, James, and John in Capernaum two thousand years ago happens every time you open your Bible and read the Gospel. You are sitting in your living room and he's right next to you and his voice is lifting from the page and speaking directly to you. There's literally no difference except the factor of time. What happened to Peter, Andrew, James and John walking with Jesus along the streets of Jerusalem and the roads of Galilee happens to you as you walk with him throughout your day. He is there with you, pointing out the good to you and giving you the strength to do it. It is literally the same as what he did with his apostles. Jesus joins you to himself as a living member of his body, when you receive Holy Communion at Mass, just as he did the apostles at the Last Supper. Amazing works take place when you act in communion with him. Only instead of them taking place through his physical body, they take place by his spiritual presence with you and his power flowing through you as a living member of his body. Walking with him, his divine power enters you and flows through you, the good is done, and the world is healed. What an incredible way to embrace the gift of your existence. What an incredible way to understand the great gift that was given to us: the presence of God in the person of Jesus, who is as real with us today as he was with Peter, James, John and Andrew two thousand years ago. The gospel story goes on. It continues in your relationship with Jesus.

The Power of His Name

Is it necessary to actually say his name? Reflect for a moment. You are a human being. In order to keep your life sane throughout the day, you have to block out and ignore a lot of people and things going on around you in order to constructively focus on the one or two things you want to accomplish. But often this means that you block out and ignore people important and dear to you. That is not good. When you call on the name of Jesus you are *not* asking Jesus to show up next to you. He is already there. When you call on his name you "break through" to his presence. You have to. It won't happen by itself. You are busy and the world is hectic. By saying his name you acknowledge his presence with you. Jesus is now *personally* present to you. Only then does his presence become real for you. When you do this as you move along through your day, the most amazing things happen. You gain eyes to see what you never noticed before. Jesus is showing you the good. You are seeing through his eyes as well as your own. You find yourself saying things you never thought to say before. You find yourself doing things you never thought to do. Jesus is inspiring you to do the good that wants doing. And as you do it, you sense a strength other than your own moving through you. You gain confidence you usually don't have. Jesus' strength is in you. You like yourself more, you see more beauty, a lot of good gets done, and the world is a better place because of you.