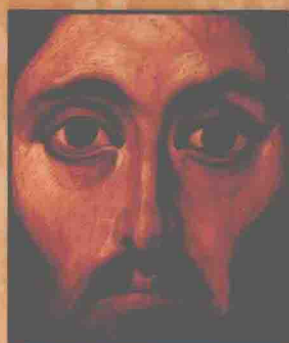


William A.
Barry, S.J.

Who Do You Say I Am?

*Meeting the
Historical
Jesus in
Prayer*



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To
James P. McDavitt, S.J.
Edward P. Babinski, S.J.
and H. Francis Cluff, S.J.
who have served the Jesuits of
the New England province
with uncommon dedication and devotion
and with an unselfish concern for the common
good,
and thus stand for all those Jesuit Brothers
whose unsung labors are often known to God
alone.

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Preface

A couple of years ago Bob Hamma of Ave Maria Press suggested that I try my hand at a book on Jesus that used some of the modern works of Christology. At the time I had no idea what that might mean. Even after I read the first volume of John Meier's *A Marginal Jew* and was moved by the knowledge gained of the historical Jesus, I did not think of writing a book. Then, just as I was beginning Meier's second volume and expecting to finish it at the thirty-fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, I found out that I had a cancerous growth on my vocal cord. The six and one-half weeks of radiation therapy needed precluded my attendance at the Congregation. I had arranged my life and work as provincial so that I would have the months of January, February, and March, 1995, free for the Congregation; now the only thing I had to do was to walk across the street five days a week for a short period of radiation therapy. The radiologist, Dr. Anthony Zeitman, recommended that I do something that would occupy my mind so that I would not focus too much on the treatments. One thing led to another, and I began to write this book.

More than with any other book I have written, the writing of this one took on a prayer dimension. Each time I turned on the computer, I tried to remember to express to Jesus the desire with which I began each chapter: "I want to know more about you so that I may love you more intensely and walk with you more closely." I mention the circumstances to explain the genesis of the book and also its rather personal nature. The cir-

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cumstances contributed, no doubt, to the particular point of view I take in the book and perhaps to some of the characteristics of the historical Jesus that I stress. In other words, my own situation with its awareness of mortality may have influenced how I read the texts I used in preparing this book. I hope, however, that I have been as true as possible to the results of research on the historical Jesus.

While the first chapter will explain my method, it may not be amiss to expand a little on what this book is about. Since the last century, scholars have tried to sift through the various layers of the New Testament to discover what can be known with some degree of certitude about the actual life and times of Jesus of Nazareth. This work has come to be known as the "search for the historical Jesus." For the most part, during the past century or more the work of these scholars has not impinged much on the beliefs and practices of ordinary Christians. In recent years, however, the search has become a topic for media attention, especially because of the publicity attending the pronouncements of the "Jesus Seminar," a group of scripture scholars who gather periodically to discuss and vote on the "authentic sayings and doings" of Jesus. Some Christians have been shocked by the results of this research, and some have felt their faith shaken. Truth to tell, some of the publicity and some of the "research" has almost seemed calculated to shock.

In my own amateur way I have tried to keep abreast of the scholarly research because I wanted to speak and write from a somewhat solid basic grasp of the scriptures. I did not find my own faith in Jesus shaken. I thought that I might be able to write something that

would help others to a deeper knowledge and love of Jesus and to a realization that solid research on the New Testament need not hinder faith, but could contribute to a deeper knowledge and love. I have written with this purpose in mind.

In writing this book I have used John Meier's two-volume work *A Marginal Jew* as my main source. Meier has undertaken a study of the sources to write a reference work on the search for the historical Jesus as part of the Anchor Bible Reference Library, a supplement to the justly famous Anchor Bible Series. It is a monumental task. He has tried to keep his own presuppositions to a minimum and to avoid the trap of reading into the data what he wanted to see. Raymond Brown, S.S., himself one of the great American scripture scholars, states: "When John Meier's work (at least three volumes) is finished it will be the best historical Jesus study produced in the twentieth century" (*An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, 216). Where appropriate and necessary I shall supplement Meier's work with that of other scholars considered equally reliable.

This current work is, understandably, a risk for someone who is neither a scripture scholar nor a professional theologian. Hence I asked Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., editor of *New Testament Abstracts*, scripture scholar and teacher, and best of all, friend, to look at the first draft of the initial chapters and tell me whether he thought the idea itself worthwhile and my own efforts on the right track. He was very encouraging at the time, indicating that someone needed to link the research on the historical Jesus to spirituality, and he made some very helpful suggestions. When I finished the whole manuscript, I again prevailed on him to read it and

comment, which he generously and graciously did. He helped me to avoid some egregious errors and to make the work more helpful. Bob Hamma of Ave Maria Press, in addition to the initial suggestion that led to this work, was also very helpful when he received the manuscript in making knowledgeable suggestions based on his own reading of recent scriptural and theological works. Kevin O'Connell, S.J., an Old Testament scholar and friend, was good enough to read the final text and to give me another theological appraisal. I am very grateful to the three of them for their help, but I have to take responsibility for the final product. Early in the project Daniel Harrington encouraged me to write to John Meier to let him know that I was relying heavily on his book and to seek comments. I am grateful to Fr. Meier for a gracious reply written while he was recovering from an illness, a reply which gave me leave to move forward (without, of course, implying endorsement for my work).

Early on I asked my friends Marika Geoghegan and Bill Russell, S.J., to read the first few chapters in rough draft. Both encouraged me and made helpful suggestions at that time, and then read the whole manuscript when I had finished the first draft and urged me to go forward with publication. My spiritual director, Anne Harvey, S.N.D., in addition to helping me to use the work to develop my own relationship with Jesus, also read the initial chapters and then the whole manuscript and urged me to publish it. I also asked Jim McDavitt, S.J., to read the manuscript. Jim and I grew up together in Worcester, Massachusetts and attended the same grammar school. When we went to different high schools we lost touch, only to find one another again in

the novitiate of the New England province where Jim was a Jesuit brother novice who had entered just a couple of months before me. Now we are members of the same community. Jim read the manuscript and gave me strong encouragement. Rosalie Anderson, with her usual generosity and attention to detail, twice proof-read the manuscript. Jim and Helen Milne invited me into their home for rest and relaxation. During my stay with them I put the final touches on the book. With friends like these I am a very blessed man.

The fact that I have been able to complete this book is due, in no small measure, to the staff of Jesuits and lay people who work together in the provincial offices. Without their care for detail and for people, including me, I would not have been able to write this book, nor would I have been able to do my primary job as provincial. I want to thank Rosalie Anderson, Ed Babinski, S.J., Frank Cluff, S.J., Noreen Connolly, Jack Crosby, Helen Curley, Gerte Daigle, Jack d'Anjou, S.J., Tom Gibbons, S.J., Louise Gilmore, Bob Hoey, S.J., Carole Iorio, Walter Kane, S.J., Paul Kenney, S.J., George Albert Kowalker, Jr., Jim Lafontaine, S.J., Dan Lewis, S.J., Martin MacDonnell, S.J., Norma Malave, Jim McDavitt, S.J., Tony Mejia, Kevin O'Connell, S.J., Bob Odams, and Bill Russell, S.J., for all that they do to make my job easier and enjoyable. All of the Jesuits just mentioned are part of my community, a very supportive and friendly group that also includes Al Hicks, S.J., and Ray Callahan, S.J. In this group I feel loved and supported; in addition, we enjoy one another's company and can laugh together at one another's foibles.

I dedicate the book to Jim McDavitt, S.J., who for forty years has been working at the Jesuit Seminary and

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Mission Bureau to raise funds for the formation of young Jesuits and for Jesuits in foreign lands; to Ed Babinski, S.J., who for thirty-five years has been indispensable to the workings of the provincial office as secretary and factotum; and to Frank Cluff, S.J., who for thirty-four years has been working tirelessly in the treasurer's office of the New England province, twenty-two of those years as province treasurer. It gives me great consolation to dedicate this book to these wonderful Jesuit brothers who have been so helpful to me and many others.

By the way, the radiation treatments seem to have worked. There is no sign of the cancer, and my voice is back to normal.

Introduction

Just Who Is Jesus?

Recently I read three very different books. They had only one thing in common, namely, a reference to a relationship with Jesus that was striking. In her best-selling *Embraced by the Light* (written with Curtis Taylor) Betty J. Eadie dedicates the book to “the Light, my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to whom I owe all that I have. He is the ‘staff’ that I lean on; without him I would fall.” The book is a rather ingenuous, unquestioning account of her near-death experience and its aftermath. Eadie may not be a critical thinker, but she obviously loves Jesus.

The American writer Reynolds Price wrote his memoir *A Whole New Life* “about a mid-life collision with cancer and paralysis, a collision I’ve survived for ten years and counting.” In it he recounts an experience of a dream-like state in which he finds himself at the Sea of Galilee surrounded by Jesus and his apostles, is drawn by Jesus into the lake and there baptized and told his sins are forgiven. Price is quite obviously a critical thinker; he recognizes the possibility of illusion but, after sifting all the evidence, he affirms his belief that in some mysterious way this was an encounter with Jesus. He then goes on to say that the experience confirmed two old convictions.

The first was my belief that the man Jesus, whose life and acts are reliably attested in more detail than those of Socrates or Julius Caesar, bore a mysterious relation to the creator. Whatever its nature, and my

sense is that it included some form of identity, it was a close relation which I'd long since concluded was unique in the history of human experience known to me (43).

The third book, *Paying the Price: Ignacio Ellacuria and the Murdered Jesuits of El Salvador* by Teresa Whitfield, is an exhaustive investigative report of the murder of the six Jesuits, their housekeeper, and her daughter in 1989. In it a *campesino* (a peasant worker), unsophisticated, yet full of passion, says to a Jesuit priest:

For me Jesus is our guide. He is a leader who gave us a good example with his life. He was in favor of the poor. He wanted there to be justice, love, understanding, and peace. He spoke really strongly against those who had power and exploited the people. He persuaded the hard of heart, took the powerful down from their thrones, and all the time was in favor of the poor. He is the first person I obey and I shall follow him always, even if that means giving up my life (64).

Three very different people from widely divergent cultural backgrounds make strong affirmations about having a relationship with Jesus. These are just three examples of millions of people who consider Jesus of Nazareth their lodestar, their savior, their friend, their way to God, indeed God made flesh. To whom are all these people relating? And how did they get to know him?

It may seem that the answers to these questions are easy. After all, the gospels tell the story of his earthly life. We can read them and get some idea of who Jesus was and what he stood for. Moreover, Jesus himself promised the Holy Spirit, who would lead his

followers throughout the centuries into a full knowledge of who he is. But things are not so simple after all. Many of us who relate to Jesus are aware that the gospels are not history as we have come to know it in the twentieth century. Some of us may have heard of the "quest for the historical Jesus" begun in the last century by scripture scholars. *Time* magazine (January 10, 1994) reported on the results of the "Jesus Seminar," a group of scripture scholars who have found approximately eighty-two percent of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the gospels to be inauthentic. (Raymond Brown points out, however, that their methodology is marked by the presupposition that Jesus could not have had extraordinary powers, a presupposition that runs counter to the earliest traditions about Jesus, who was remembered as a man who had precisely such powers; see *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, 24-25.) Many may, as a result of all the publicity about the search for the historical Jesus, wonder whether we can know anything at all about him. If we cannot, is our relationship made out of whole cloth, a product of our own and others' imaginations? I want to address some of these questions in this book in order to help us to a more solid grounding in our relationship to Jesus, so that we will not be unnecessarily shaken by the claims of scholars.

Having had two very fine scripture professors when I was preparing for the priesthood, I have some sense of the fact that the gospels are not eyewitness reports of what Jesus did and said. Hence I wince when homilists speak glibly, it seems to me, of what Jesus said and did, seeming to presume that the gospels are an accurate account of the historical Jesus. But I have to admit that the

shoe has often enough been on the other foot in spite of my fine professors. For example, any number of times I have referred to the story of the Syrophoenician woman to show that Jesus was a product of his own cultural prejudices and that he learned from experience.

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone (Mark 7:24-30).

I took the view that this story would not have been kept by the early church unless it really had happened, because it seems embarrassing to have Jesus speak so grossly to this poor woman. After all, he as much as calls her a dog because she is a Gentile, not a Jew. Imagine my chagrin when I read in the second volume of John Meier's *A Marginal Jew*: "Weighing all the pros and cons, it seems to me that the story of the Syrophoenician woman is so shot through with Christian missionary theology and concerns that creation by first-generation Christians is the more likely conclusion" (660-61). Not the first time that I have found myself mistaken. This little story, however, puts before us the