

Following the Ultimate Attraction

BY MARY BETH NEWKUMET



My daughter recently came back from the theatre excited about the blockbuster movie she had just seen. For her, “The Lord of the Rings” had lived up to its marquee billing as a major attraction.

“I just love stories like that,” she said, “you know, where there is one person with extraordinary gifts and powers who is the answer to the situation surrounding everyone else around...”

She then went on to name all the recent movies she had seen where the central character was the leader, friend and savior of all the rest. “There is always something about those people, you know. It just makes you want to get into that movie and be with them.”

Isn’t that what attraction is all about? You find someone so compelling that you want to follow wherever they are?

ULTIMATELY ATTRACTIVE

What if there was an attractive person with extraordinary gifts and powers who really could save you in your life right now, in the circumstances with which you struggle? What if this person brought the fulfillment of all the authentic desires of your heart, restoring you to your truest self? Not only that but what if this person loved you with a care and attention that transcended even the mortal bonds of this earth?

What would you do if you encountered this person today and saw the fulfillment of everything you hoped to be in his eyes? Would you stop what you were doing, and follow him right out the door in a bit of a stupor — just like in the movies? Would you answer

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Mary, the first Steward of Christ

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his call, pledge your life to remain in his company and never look back?

I don't know how you answered but for me and others throughout the centuries, the answer has been a passionate yes. Sound, practical, reasonable people have suddenly dropped their nets, given up their attachments and walked away from their good fortunes — not out of obligation — but to follow this one who is the response to every human longing.

A RADICAL CLAIM

The Catholic Church makes the radical claim that Jesus Christ has been personally encountered *just like this* during earthly life — and can be encountered by each one of us today, too. I know because in the past decade, this stunning event has happened to me. I did not expect it nor, quite frankly, believe it could happen until after my death! With complete surprise, I suddenly encountered the Person of Jesus Christ and set off in his company deeper into the life of the Church.

Let me be clear. I have not just encountered the values of Christ, the historical actions of Christ or the morality of Christ. I have encountered him in such a way that I recognize his presence in everyday life down to the core of my being. The more time I spend with him in the Word and before the Blessed Sacrament, the more certain I am of this truth. In fact, Christ's presence is as real to me as the people and things around me that I can see, hear and touch with all my natural senses.

My decision to follow Jesus Christ in the Church is the decision to follow the ultimate attraction of human existence. I follow not out of duty or enslavement, but out of love and a desire for a deeper intimacy with this Person who is leading the way. Through sheer grace, I follow knowing I am not in charge of the plan, the path or the destination.

"In order to follow someone, we have to abandon our own position, ourselves," says Msgr. Luigi Giussani. "The profound meaning of this renunciation — the renunciation of 'self' as a criterion — was destined to emerge later in the souls of those who followed him."

FOLLOWING HIS FOLLOWERS

In the heart of the Catholic Church, I have encountered Jesus Christ in Person through his faithful followers — those attractive Christians who fully receive his presence on Sunday and then live his divine love in their families, parishes and communities throughout the rest of the week.

I have watched how these followers allow Christ to shape their vocations and then joyfully follow this path everyday with him. I have seen how they passionately love him in each other, with a preference for the poor in spirit or resources. I have seen the wonder and awe with which they approach the great mysteries of sex, birth, suffering and death. I can't imagine living any other way. In fact, no movie scenario can come close to the adventure, miracle, romance and splendor of following an authentic Christian life.

Given my personal experience, I can see why St. Therese of Lisieux once wrote: "I'd have plunged through flames to follow Jesus." Sound like the scene from a blockbuster movie? It's even more exciting than that: It's real human life — fully alive.

Jesus Christ is the ultimate attraction. Are you ready to follow? ❖

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Following Jesus to His Banquet

BY FR. THOMAS LAHOOD

Did you ever wonder why the Church includes a Penitential Rite at the beginning of Mass? The obvious answer that comes to mind is that we need to be purified of our venial sins before we offer worship to God. What goes along with this action of calling to mind our sins is a calling to mind of the fact that we are sinners. We become consciously aware of our need for redemption and of the crosses of our own sins that we carry with us.

And he got up and followed him.” (v. 14). As we soon find out, following Jesus means being with Jesus and having Jesus with us. Jesus then goes to Levi’s house to eat. Again, the scribes scold him: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (v. 16). Jesus answers: “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (vv. 16, 17).

Jesus comes to meet us as sinners. In fact, sin is the meeting point between God and man. Jesus on the Cross is God confronting and taking

“There are certain provocations that, because of their radical nature, man cannot eliminate or censure once he has perceived them, if he is to act as a man. Man is forced to answer yes or no. The mere fact that he has heard the news that one man declared: ‘I am God,’ means that he cannot be indifferent to it. He must arrive at his own conviction as to whether the news is true or false.”

- Msgr. Luigi Giussani



HE MEETS US AS SINNERS

In chapter two of St. Mark’s Gospel, Jesus heals the paralytic. More importantly, though, Jesus forgives his sins. The scribes scold Jesus for this: “Who but God can forgive sins?” (v. 7). Then, to prove his authority to forgive sins Jesus heals the paralytic.

St. Mark, having established Jesus’ authority over sins now has Jesus call sinners. “As he passed by, he saw Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting at this custom post. He said to him, ‘Follow me.’

on our sins. Jesus first meets us as sinners and then merits forgiveness of those sins in his suffering and death.

THE MEAL AND THE CROSS

The Mass is where we meet Jesus in his sacrifice on the Cross. The Mass makes present again, sacramentally, the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. The only way to come to the Cross is as sinners. Only a sinner will have the proper response to Jesus’ sacrifice: love, humility, and thanksgiving. Recall the two thieves crucified with Jesus. One arrogantly demanded that Jesus “save [himself] and us.” (Lk

23:39). The other thief humbly understood that he deserved his punishment. The good thief’s great insight — clearly a gift of grace — was that Jesus did not deserve death on the Cross; that Jesus’ suffering and death were completely self-sacrificial. He realized that this sacrifice would open the gates to Heaven. So he says to Jesus: “Remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” (Lk 23:42).

Jesus’ call to Levi “Follow me” brought Levi (a sinner) and Jesus together at a meal. Later, in chapter eight of St. Mark’s Gospel, Jesus says that “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” (v. 34). The meal and the Cross come together at Mass. We follow Jesus to his banquet and to His sacrifice on the Cross. We poor sinners eat the Body of our Lord, a banquet of the sacrificial lamb eaten by sinners. ❖

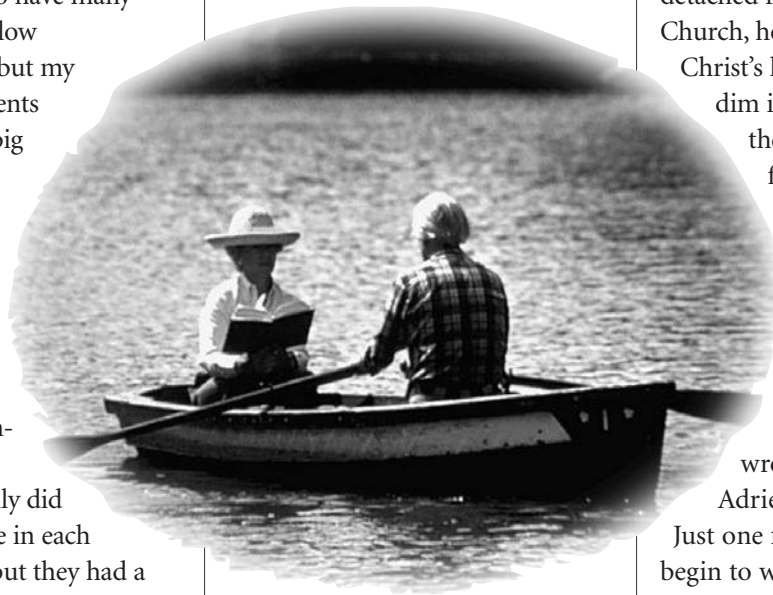
Following Christ in Your Family

Young people often follow adults they consider the most attractive. When I was growing up, I was blessed to have many good people to follow within my family, but my paternal grandparents had an especially big impact on me.

I spent a lot of time with them in the decade after their 50th wedding anniversary and I was always struck by their continuing delight in each other. Not only did they seem to thrive in each other's company, but they had a heart-to-heart intimacy that made them seem very young and alive. My grandmother called my grandfather her "boyfriend" until the day he died when they were in their mid-90s — and she always said it with a glimmer in her eye. As a teenager, I thought that was awesome.

I don't ever remember them giving me verbal instructions on how to live a good Catholic life. Instead, they showed me. Both of my grandparents were devoted to the Blessed Mother. Their well-used rosary beads were always within sight. And since they were living the fulfillment of my desire for enduring happiness in the vocation to marriage, *I followed them*. I began to walk more carefully in their path. Not only did I try to treat other people the way they treated each other, but I also began to pursue a close relation-

ship with Mary that continues to this day.



FOLLOWING WITH A GLIMMER

"The Christian family is the first community called to announce the Gospel to the human person during growth and to bring him or her, through a progressive education and catechesis, to full human and Christian maturity," observes Pope John Paul II (FC, 2).

Children learn to follow Christ, his Mother and the saints first within their families. While a strong formal religious education is essential, the family's way of life is often the most convincing sign that Christ's divine life and love can be beautifully encountered here and now. When a family lives with a vibrant adherence to the Church's life, it becomes a great light to surrounding children and adults. It becomes a "domestic

Church" filled with the splendor of the living God. When family members go their own way detached from the universal Church, however, the radiance of Christ's life and love can become dim in that couple, and therefore more difficult for young family members and others to experience and discern.

"God leads men through men and employs the one to lead the other to him," wrote 20th century mystic Adrienne von Speyr.

Just one family member can begin to walk down the path with Christ that the rest can follow — toward a heart-to-heart intimacy and an unmistakable never-ending glimmer. ❖

— MBN

Getting There... Bringing Others Along

Some families have members who refuse to follow a life with Christ in the Church. How can you help bring them along? First, recognize and love Christ as a gift to you! This recognition ensures that his approach to others through you will not be a speech or an imposition, but rather a witness to the beauty and joy that he has brought into your life. Second, watch him work and continue to follow him with passion!

Walking on Water Now

BY JOHN M. CAPOBIANCO

The popular Christian poem “Footprints in the Sand” expresses the awareness in a dream, at the end of life, that Jesus is the one who carries us during our most difficult and troubling times. While this is a beautiful realization, I have always reacted with a palpable pain to this poem. I suppose, one can be grateful that Jesus will give us a clear insight at the end of our life — of when he carried us by himself and when he simply walked side by side with us — I, however, want the joy of his companionship here and now in such a way that I know where he wants me to go so I can follow. I want to experience his calm now during my most difficult challenges. I want to know his peace when I confront any suffering. I want to allow his wisdom and love to shape my life. I definitely don’t want to be at the end and look back at the most difficult times of my life and feel like he was not there. I wouldn’t expect that of any friend, much less him.

I have found that the reality of following Jesus everyday in my life is a much more personally satisfying experience than this poem expresses. Far from disappearing during times of challenge and suffering, Christ, in and through his Church, has always been there for me especially during difficult times. The key to this companionship is spending time with him by reading scripture often. When I began to let scripture shape my life, Christ began to shape my

heart and generosity. By simply spending time with the Mass readings of the day — first in a daily missal, now through the publication *Magnificat* — and looking for his movement throughout the rest of the day, he has led me to a very different experience of daily life. “A [generous] soul is never dismayed, either by the difficulties of the road that it has to traverse, or by the greatness of the work it is called upon to perform, or by the length of time that it must give to it, or finally, by the delay in the progress of the work undertaken,” observes St. Francis de Sales. When I follow Christ in this way, it becomes abundantly clear when he carries me.

GET OUT OF THE BOAT

The real challenge of following Christ this way occurs when, becoming more and more confident in his companionship, one begins to see all the things that are possible through his love. Then, like Peter standing in the boat, you see something astonishing that is clearly impossible for you and yet you ask him “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water” (Mt. 14:28). I have felt this way many times when I know I could not accomplish what I thought Christ wanted of me. Watching his action, asking him for guidance and listening for him to say “Come” is the key to following him with confidence. “Following Christ (faith) thus generates a characteristic existential

attitude by which man walks upright and untiring towards a destination not yet reached although sure (hope),” says Msgr. Luigi Giussani. “It is an attitude which is always struggling with the void of risk because the remoteness of the destination always tempts us to fall into uncertainty. This is overcome at a point beyond our own criteria — in abandonment and adherence to Jesus Christ (charity). It is this that generates a new experience of peace, the fundamental experience of life on its pathway.”

With this faith, hope and charity, one is never alone in any of life’s trials. One can go peacefully wherever Christ commands, especially when it means “walking on water” and knowing that it is only possible because he is carrying you. ❖

“There are many mansions in the House of my Heavenly Father.” (Jn 14:2)
Jesus said that, and that’s why I follow the way He is tracing out for me. I try not to worry about myself at all anymore. I leave it to Him to do in my soul whatever He wants.”

— St. Therese of Lisieux
 (Letter to Maurice Belliere)

Following His Wonderful Works

BY PETER SONSKI

Among my favorite Gospel narratives are those in which Jesus is actively engaged in his public ministry: preaching, healing, praying, inspiring. The evangelists recount how Jesus was often overrun with people. St. Mark even claims, “it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He remained outside in deserted places, and people kept coming to him from everywhere” (1:45).

Such notoriety is more prevalent among teen idols and sports heroes than itinerant preachers these days, but it’s easy to imagine the scene. The intrigue that surrounded Jesus dominated people’s interests and made a personal encounter with him a priority. They were captivated by his teaching and awed by his miracles. Nothing they had experienced could compare with Jesus’ message and wonderful works. Yet not all understood the true implications of his ministry.

ENCOUNTERING HIM IN AN ENTIRELY NEW MANNER

The Gospel of Luke tells us that some sought to follow Jesus, but in a superficial way (cf. Luke 9:57-62). The passage also illustrates how some whom Jesus invited to follow him as disciples could not detach themselves from their customs and yearnings to properly do so. Jesus obviously listens not only to words of our mouths but also to the aspirations of our hearts. He knows our dispositions better than we do ourselves.

In the fulfillment of his Paschal Mystery however, Jesus bestowed new grace and insight

upon the Church and the faithful through the workings of the Holy Spirit. Having loosed them from the bonds of sin, his disciples recognized him in an entirely new manner: “in the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:35). It is in this same way that Catholics today identify Jesus, in their parish Eucharistic celebrations.

Just as in the Acts of the Apostles where the Christian community was united in heart and mind, actively concerned for the needs of others (cf. 4:32-35), so too can we follow the loving example of Jesus today, guided by the Holy Spirit. We gather in our parishes each week to draw life from the Eucharist, to nourish ourselves in Word and in Sacrament, and to unite ourselves with others in faith. In this way Jesus becomes proximate to us, first in the Real Presence of his Body and Blood on the altar, and secondly in the presence of his Mystical Body, the Church.

TO LEARN AND OFFER

I don’t imagine that our parish communities always exhibit this perfect Christian harmony. I served in many capacities at the parish level — council president, catechist, chief usher, diocesan synod representative, school advisory board member,



etc. — and have encountered concord as well as discord among fellow parishioners.

What prevailed however, as it always should, was an outlook that we all have something to learn, as well as something to offer. That is, we were all still incomplete Christians who needed to grow in faith and to help others do likewise.

As the disciples who sought to learn “Rabbi, where are you staying?” we can heed Jesus’ reply to “Come, and you will see” (John 1:38-39). Jesus remains ever with us to teach, heal, and inspire. He calls us to unite around his table, setting aside individual preferences for his divine will.

Moreover, it is in the parish community that we are to make Jesus more widely known, through our public witness and stewardship. Our attendance at Mass and participation in the sacraments obtains sanctifying grace and encourages others in their practice of faith. Our support of the parish and to the needy in the community fulfills our mission of discipleship, of living and spreading the Gospel.

Jesus is still beckoning us, and his Church is providing the pathway on which we are to proceed. As we reflect on discipleship, let us consider how we meet Christ in our parish, how we respond together to his invitation to follow him, and attract others to follow his wonderful works in us. ❖

Being His Way in the World

BY JOSEPH SCHUBERTH

When I made my decision to go to a secular university of about 12,000 students, I knew I would be in for a barrage of different morals, religions, and cultures. Sure, most people knew Jesus, but he was the foreign exchange student on the fifth floor and no one really followed him. As a freshman, I hung out with all kinds of people and there were many times I could have been knocked off my path towards the Lord. Luckily, I was blessed with parents who instilled a steadfast faith in me and a good core group of friends who always led me in the direction towards Jesus Christ.

As a sophomore, it was time to get more involved, so I took a leadership



position as a Resident Assistant in my residence hall. During my two years as a Resident Assistant, I experienced the impact a Catholic can have on a group of people who wondered what that string of beads was (rosary), or who that veiled woman in the picture on my desk was (Mary), or why I was

all dressed up on a Sunday morning before everyone else had gotten out of bed.

A WAY OF FAITHFUL ATTENTION

A Resident Assistant, or RA, is like a big brother to a floor of residents, responsible for them and a resource for anything they need. I watched over the 40 residents on my floor and the other 250 residents were divided between three other RAs. A large part of a RA's job is listening and problem solving. I listened to the problems of residents not only on my floor, but throughout the entire building as well. On many occasions, I would have to inform the other RAs what was happening on their floors.

During my RA career, I was involved with every ambulance visit to my building (I have tons of stories to prove it) and have heard everything from, "she's using my shampoo" to "take this knife away from me so I don't kill myself."

Many of these residents could have easily gone to their own RAs, but I had something those other RAs did not. Doing my best to follow God in my everyday life, I had the peace and presence of the Lord all around me. The residents felt this and were attracted to it, even if they did not realize it. God was reaching out to them through me and all I was doing was being myself.

"The Lord goes before those who belong to him. For he knows the way. He knows it because he is himself the way. And because he is the way, he shows the way. He leads those who belong to him on his way. His way is the way from the Father to the Father and, thus, the way of love. On this way, there exists nothing other than love for those who follow him: a love that he gives as he leads them and expects as he leads them, a love that those who belong to him receive as they follow him and return as they follow him. The act of following is itself love."

- Adrienne von Speyr

I may have not converted anyone to Catholicism during my time as a RA, but the residents of my building did experience Jesus' presence by the way He cared for me. One day when they need it most, I hope they will remember that feeling of faithful attention and call upon the Lord for help and He will find a way to lead them to Paradise. All of us can help others experience the Lord just by doing our best to follow Him in our everyday lives. You will never know what kind of an impact you made on someone until you get to heaven and that person thanks you for helping him or her get there. ❖



FROM THE MYSTICAL MONSIGNOR

Following the Source of Your Love

Think of the Apostle Andrew after he met Christ. Andrew leaves everything to follow him. He even leaves his wife. But does he really leave her? As he goes after that which is the source of their love, he follows Jesus to preserve his love for this woman, because he recognizes in him that from which that love came. Andrew's following must have profoundly deepened the way he loved his wife.

That's what it means that Christ is the ideal, the center, the purpose. By following, there is no interest in you that is not reshaped, guided, taken over by this attraction for Christ. And it becomes the way you see, judge, love, do everything. Christ has to do with what touches you, what makes you you, with every conceivable dimension. It's a totalizing thing. He's the ideal of life, the decisive constitutive factor of what you call your life. He is the reason you can say "I." If Christ has re-defined that "I" for you, then his presence will be felt everywhere that your presence is felt. ❖

— Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete

*U.S. Ecclesiastical Advisor for Communion and Liberation,
an international movement in the Church*

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Ponder in Your Heart

Discussion Questions

Do you believe that Jesus Christ can be encountered with certainty during your earthly life? (p. 1 and 2)

- Describe the Christians that you find most attractive.
- Who are the compelling people you are following?

How do we follow Christ on Sunday? (p. 3)

- Read the story of the call of Levi (Mk 2:13-17).
- Have you had an experience of the presence of God in the midst of sin?

Is the presence of Christ's life and love evident in your family? (p. 4)

- Who were the family members you followed while you were growing up?
- How does "God lead men to men" in a practical way in family life?

How do you follow Christ's living Presence in your parish? (p. 6)

- Describe some things about your parish community that have attracted you and encouraged you to stay?
- How does your local parish "provide the pathway on which we are to proceed"?

How can you become Christ's "Way" out in the world? (p. 7)

- Describe an experience where the Lord was working through you.
- Where do you get the courage and strength to keep following even in large secular settings?

Looking for ways to bring *Life After Sunday* into parish programs already in place? Visit www.lifeaftersunday.com/parishlife.html for suggestions, or call us for personal assistance.