



*Christ, the Lord of the World* by Peter Paul Rubens

## INTRODUCTION

# REFOCUSING ON JESUS

The richness of the Catholic Faith is simply breathtaking! Yet the many and marvelous gifts in the treasury of Catholic Tradition—such as Mary, the saints, the Eucharist, and the Creed—all flow from and point back to one single figure: Jesus Christ. He is the vital center of it all—indeed, the heart of our Faith.

One of the constant themes of all the popes for the past sixty years has been the need to re-center everything in Catholic life on the person of Jesus. This, of course, is the key to effective evangelization. Each and every Catholic is called to help bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to a world that desperately needs him. But it is only to the degree that we know him and abide in him that we can share him effectively.

True, all of us know much *about him* already. Yet how well do we actually *know him*? If St. Paul, after decades as an apostle, can say that he is eager to “press on” to a greater knowledge of Christ and yearns for a deeper intimacy with Christ crucified and risen (Philippians 3:3-12), how much more zealous should we be to unpack the “unsearchable riches of Christ” (Ephesians 3:8).

### All the Gospels

That is the purpose of this study. It is meant to be a new and fresh look at Jesus—who he is, what he taught, and what he did for our salvation.

While the study of one Gospel is extremely valuable, we will not follow that format here. There are four Gospels for a reason: no one Evangelist, though inspired by the Holy Spirit, gives us a full picture of the Savior. Each one offers his own unique perspective. When we look at the four Gospels together, a composite sketch emerges that provides us with new insight—indeed, greater depth perception.

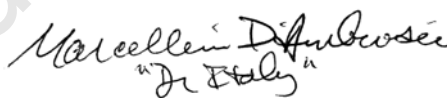
If this study couldn't be limited to one biblical author, neither could it be written by a single contemporary author. The three of us have prepared ourselves to collaborate on this study by traveling many times to the land Pope Benedict XVI called "the fifth Gospel"—the Holy Land. There we have walked in the footsteps of Jesus, pondering his words and deeds in their original setting. In this study, we want to invite you to take this journey with us and participate in our dialogue with the land, the inspired texts, and each other.

## Encountering the Way, the Truth, and the Life

Sometimes, committed Catholics can be tempted to cultivate a personal relationship with theology rather than with Jesus himself! You will certainly learn a lot of new things in this study. But this program is designed not just to share *information* but to lead to *transformation*—a new encounter with Christ that will energize and empower you to live for him more joyfully and share him with others more effectively.

That's why this study is called *Jesus: The Way, the Truth, and the Life*. The *truth* about him can only be uncovered by walking in the *way* of discipleship, which leads to the abundant *life* that will be Good News for the world!

Your brothers in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marcellino D'Ambrosio" with a stylized flourish underneath.

Marcellino D'Ambrosio

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeff Cavins" in a cursive style.

Jeff Cavins

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Edward Sri" in a cursive style.

Edward Sri



Basilica of the Annunciation and other buildings in modern Nazareth, Israel

## SESSION ONE

# JESUS AND HISTORY

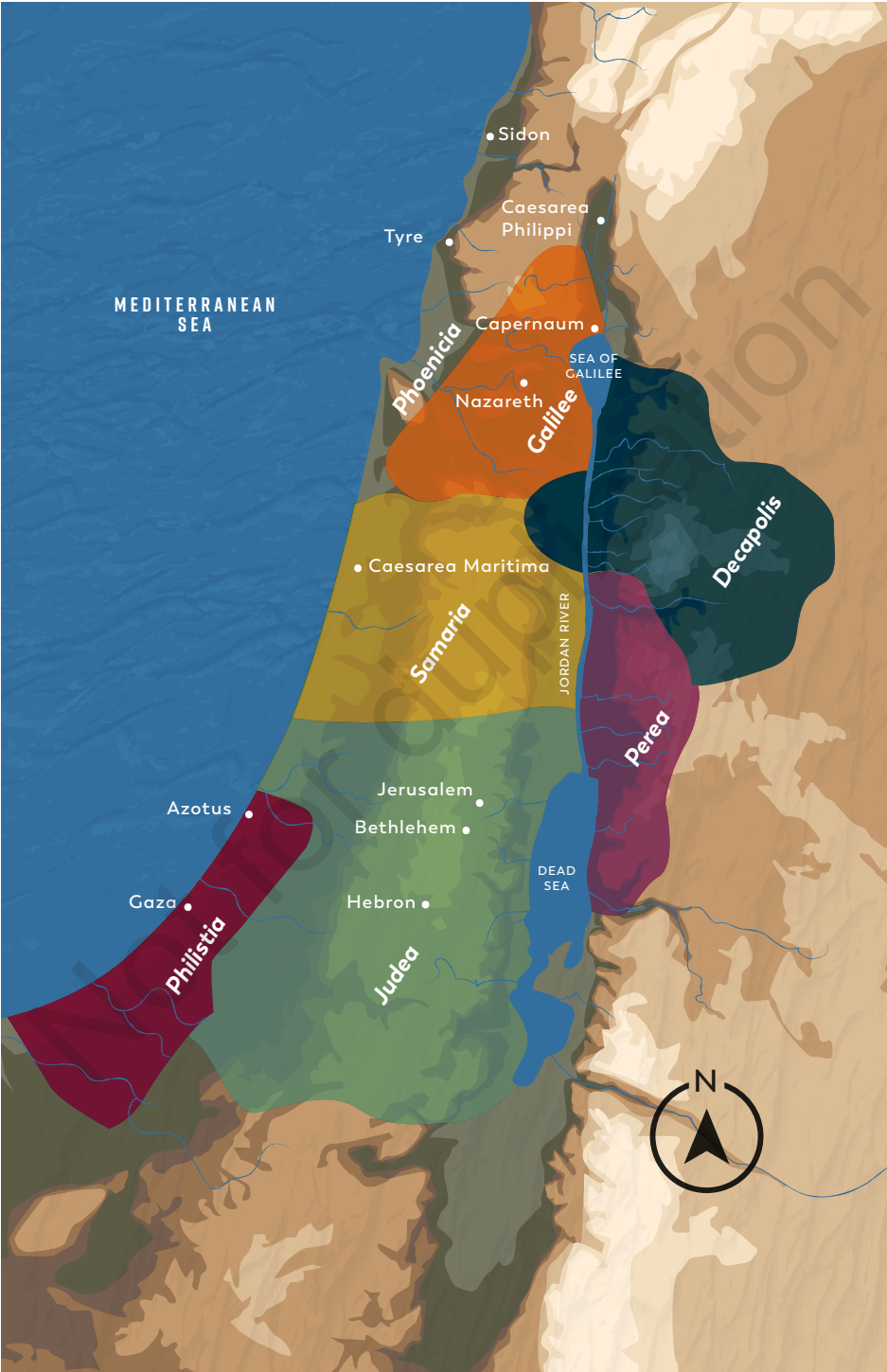
### A. Establish the Context

The Incarnation is the central dogma of Christian faith—that the eternal God entered into our world and became flesh at a precise moment in time and space, becoming “the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). Despite all the efforts made to secularize modern culture, the birth of Jesus of Nazareth is still the central event of history by which the world reckons time.

To understand him and his mission, we first need to establish what we can learn from the sources that are available to us. Historical studies verify that the four Gospels revered by Christians for two thousand years are documents dating from the first century and are based on eyewitness testimony, unlike the so-called gospels of Thomas and Judas.

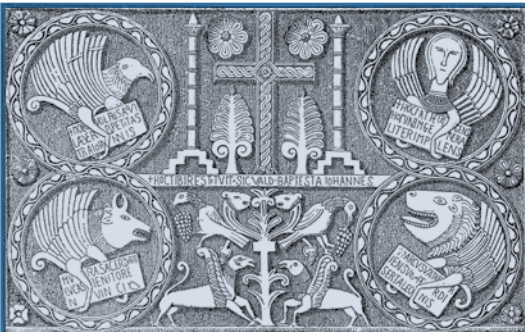
Yet Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were not concerned to tell us many of the historical details biographers seek to know—such as a detailed account of Jesus’ thirty or so years in Nazareth or the precise order of events in his public ministry. But more importantly, these four evangelists tell us much more than historians would look for—namely, the *meaning* of who Jesus is and what he did, and what bearing it has on our lives both now and eternally. In this study, we will be led by the evangelists, who were led by the Spirit, and focus on opening ourselves more completely to the mystery and saving mission of Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

**Palestine in the Time of Jesus**



The Word became flesh at a precise time and place. Without better understanding this time and place, we will miss much of the meaning of his words and deeds. Two worlds, the Roman and the Jewish, were intersecting, even colliding, at the time of Jesus' earthly life. Two peoples were living together in tension—one group who thought their time had come, another who thought their time was about to come. Two worlds. Two ways to freedom and glory.

And upon this stage steps one who says his kingdom is not of this world at all (John 18:36), one who proclaims to both ways that *HE* is the Way (John 14:6), one who is meek and humble of heart (Matthew 11:29) and yet is perceived to be such a threat that both worlds conspire to eliminate him.



### ST. IRENAEUS AND THE FOUR GOSPELS

Nowhere in the text of the four Gospels do the evangelists reveal their names. Our earliest written witness to the names of the Gospel writers comes from St. Irenaeus, a bishop writing about AD 185:

So Matthew among the Hebrews issues a Writing of the gospel in their own tongue, while Peter and Paul were preaching the gospel at Rome and founding the Church. After their decease Mark, the disciple and interpreter of

Peter, also handed down to us in writing what Peter had preached. Then Luke, the follower of Paul, recorded in a book the gospel as it was preached by him. Finally, John, the disciple of the Lord, who had also lain on his breast, himself published the Gospel, while he was residing at Ephesus. ("Against Heresies")

Irenaeus regards it as highly significant, even necessary, that the authentic Gospels are four in number. In the ancient world, the four points of the compass represented the whole world. A universal (catholic) church, called to preach the gospel to the whole world, fittingly has a four-fold Gospel foundation:

The Gospels could not possibly be either more or less in number than they are. Since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is spread over all the earth, and the pillar and foundation of the Church is the gospel, and the Spirit of life, it fittingly has four pillars ... a gospel fourfold in form but held together by one Spirit. (Ibid.)



### JOSEPHUS ON JESUS OF NAZARETH

The only reference to Jesus written by a secular historian of the first century is that of Flavius Josephus, a Jew who endeavored to explain the history of his people to a Roman audience. At some point in the second century, a Christian scribe added some words to the text that caused many to doubt its authenticity. Careful scholarship has removed this interpolation, leaving what most scholars regard as Josephus' original text:

At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians (named after him) has not died out. (*Jewish Antiquities*)

## B. Read the Story

**REMINDER:** There is no home preparation for Session One. The following Scripture readings and discussion questions are to be done together when your small group meets for the first time.

Carefully read the following Scripture passages:

Philippians 3:7-16, The Surpassing Goal of Knowing Christ

Luke 1:1-4, The Purpose of Luke's Gospel

John 20:30-31, The Purpose of John's Gospel

For more background, read the preface, introduction, and chapter 1 of *Jesus: The Way, the Truth, and the Life*, by Marcellino D'Ambrosio, the book that accompanies this study.

## C. Take a Deeper Look

Think about what you seek to gain from undertaking this new study at this moment when Western culture increasingly sees Jesus as irrelevant and outdated.

### 1. Knowledge of God Versus Knowledge About God

- a. In Philippians 3:7-16, how does Paul describe spiritual maturity?
- b. Read John 17:3, keeping in mind the theme of this study—*Jesus: The Way, the Truth, and the Life*. How is knowing God the Father and Jesus Christ related to the experience of “life” (eternal life)?

2. **The Gospels and History.** In Luke 1:1-4 and John 20:30-31, two of the evangelists tell us their purpose in writing their Gospels.
  - a. What is Luke's stated purpose? What is John's?
  - b. How do their purposes compare with the approach you would expect of a secular historian or biographer?

## D. Application

### REFLECT

Toward the end of his life, St. Francis of Assisi was already considered a living saint by many people. Friar Thomas of Celano, his first biographer, tells us that at this time Francis would say, "Let us begin, brothers, to serve the Lord God, for up until now we have done little or nothing.' He did not consider that he had already attained his goal, but tireless in pursuit of holy newness, he constantly hoped to begin again."<sup>1</sup>

### COMMIT

Dedicate the investment you make in this study toward a new beginning of your relationship with Jesus. Commit yourself to a "tireless ... pursuit of holy newness" in Christ, who makes all things new (Revelation 21:5).

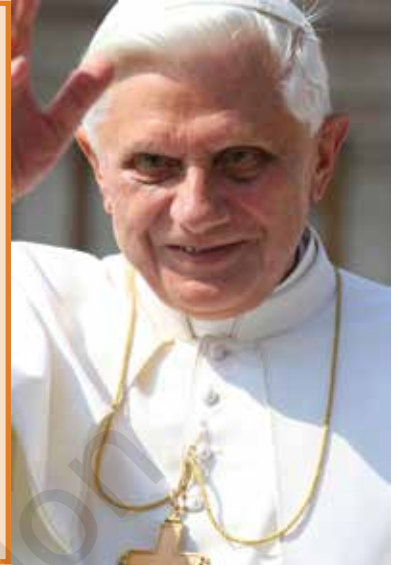
### PRAY

*Lord Jesus, I thank you for all that you've revealed to me so far about who you are and your plan for my life. But I know there is so much more! Open my eyes to see in your Holy Word what, till now, has eluded me . . . or what I once knew but have allowed to slip away. I believe you are calling me to a new intimacy with you, and I say with Mary, my mother, yes, Lord, let it be! Through the intercession of St. Paul and St. Francis, enkindle a new fire in my heart, put a new passion in my soul, and shine new light upon my mind, that I may know you as the Way, the Truth, and the Life!*

## THE FIFTH GOSPEL

“The Word became flesh in a specific time and place, in a strip of land on the edges of the Roman Empire. The more we appreciate the universality and the uniqueness of Christ’s person, the more we look with gratitude to that land where Jesus was born, where he lived and where he gave his life for us. The stones on which our Redeemer walked are still charged with his memory and continue to ‘cry out’ the Good News. For this reason, the Synod Fathers recalled the felicitous phrase which speaks of the Holy Land as ‘the Fifth Gospel.’ ... The more we turn our eyes and our hearts to the earthly Jerusalem, the more will our yearning be kindled for the heavenly Jerusalem, the true goal of every pilgrimage, along with our eager desire that the name of Jesus, the one name which brings salvation, may be acknowledged by all.”

—Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*



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## THE MEANING OF THE WORD GOSPEL

“The term [evangelion or gospel] has recently been translated as ‘good news.’ That sounds attractive, but it falls far short of the order of magnitude of what is actually meant by the word *evangelion*. This term figures in the vocabulary of the Roman emperors, who understood themselves as lords, saviors, and redeemers of the world. The messages issued by the emperor were called in Latin *evangelium*, regardless of whether or not their content was particularly cheerful and pleasant. The idea was that what comes from the emperor is a saving message, that it is not just a piece of news, but a change of the world for the better.”

—Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*

## SESSION ONE TALK NOTES

# JESUS AND HISTORY

### I. Knowing Christ Versus Knowing About Him

- A. Growing indifference in the Western world toward Christ and Christianity
  - 1. Jesus arrived on the scene of the first century as someone startlingly new
  - 2. Many Christians know facts *about* him but don't know him
- B. Knowledge of God in Old Testament: *da'at Elohim*
  - 1. Knowing facts versus knowing persons
  - 2. “... You shall know the Lord” (Hosea 3:16-20)
- C. Knowledge of God and of Jesus in the New Testament
  - 1. Eternal life (John 17:3)
  - 2. Paul's quest to “know” Christ (Philippians 3:8-16)

### II. History and the Gospels

- A. Are the Gospels history?
  - 1. Faith and reason can never contradict each other
  - 2. Reason—historical sources on Jesus of Nazareth
    - a. The four canonical Gospels
    - b. Gnostic gospels: Thomas, Judas
    - c. Secular sources: Josephus and Tacitus
  - 3. Faith—Tradition and teaching of the Church
    - a. Inspiration
    - b. Biography versus proclamation—information versus transformation
    - c. Four Gospels
      - i. Why one is not enough
      - ii. St. Irenaeus and the symbolism of four—universal, catholic
    - d. The fifth Gospel—the Holy Land

### III. The Word and the Worlds

#### A. Stage of history

1. The eternal enters into time (John 1:1-4); the Word “dwelt among us”—literally, “pitched his tent” (John 1:14)
2. Myth versus history: “This was not done in a corner” (Acts 26:26)—center stage

#### B. Roman world, Roman way

1. Masters of the world—their moment had come
2. Octavian, adopted son of Julius Caesar
  - a. Augustus, or “great one”
  - b. Son of god, the divine Caesar
3. Peace: via conquest
4. Glory: triumphs, pomp, luxury

#### C. Jewish world, Jewish ways—God’s Chosen People

1. Promises to patriarchs
  - a. Land and numerous descendants, family, and a home (Genesis 22:17)
  - b. All nations shall be blessed through them
2. Call and covenant
  - a. Chosen
  - b. Torah
  - c. Land
  - d. Sabbath
3. Jerusalem and the Temple
  - a. Temple—place of encounter with God
  - b. Sacred space—where heaven and earth intersect

**4. Hope**

- a.** Israel was no longer free—exiled, back in Egypt
- b.** They had taken many losses because of their sins
  - i.** Ten of the twelve tribes
  - ii.** The Ark and the glory (Ezekiel 10:15-19, 11:22-23)
  - iii.** Davidic king
  - iv.** Roman presence due to the sins of their own leaders
- c.** But they had a future, they were going somewhere—soon
  - i.** Moses, David, Maccabees
  - ii.** Victory stories told during pilgrimage festivals
  - iii.** God would do it again, bigger

**5. Expectation**

- a.** A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1)
- b.** New David, “messiah” as anointed warrior like David

**IV. Jesus**

- A.** Two worlds were on a collision course
- B.** Jesus was a sign of contradiction to them both