

## MN Contemplative 2021 Fall Retreat by Fr. Vincent Pizzuto

### *Session 4 - Gospels Made Flesh Within Us - Reading from the Inside Out*

#### CONTEMPLATING CHRIST READING FROM THE INSIDE OUT *Selected Readings, p. 32-34*

Sometimes we do not understand the meaning of our story until we tell it. For in its telling, the spoken word becomes incarnate in us—embodied, as it were. A contemplative reading is embodied insofar as we realize the gospels are not only told to us but, more importantly, told through us. They are not merely iterations of past events but narratives that speak to one's own interior encounter with God—or, rather, God's encounter with us. The gospels can never be fully understood from the outside looking in, because they

were written for participants, not spectators, and thus to apprehend their deepest meaning, we must allow them to draw us in and inward. If deification remains but an abstract theological concept we have not yet touched on the transformative power of the gospel.

There is a story from the Desert Mothers and Fathers that conveys the power of embodying even one verse from Scripture. When Abba Pambo was still a young apprentice he approached one of the Elders to learn a psalm. The elder began with Psalm 39: "I said I will take heed of your way, that I offend not with my tongue." After hearing this first verse, Pambo departed without waiting to hear the second half of the verse. He said to himself, "This one verse is sufficient if I can practically acquire it," by which he meant to realize the text in himself, to embody it. It was more than six months before he would visit the elder monk again. When he did, the elder admonished him for his long absence. But Pambo explained the reason he had been gone so long was that he had given himself over completely to the one verse the elder had given him but confessed he had still not been successful. After many years, one of Pambo's companions asked whether he had ever mastered the verse, to which he replied, "I have scarcely succeeded in accomplishing it even after nineteen years."

Pambo's earnestness exemplifies what it means to read the Scriptures from the inside out. Virtually every passage from Scripture contains within it the entire Gospel. By acquiring one particular verse from a psalm, Pambo had to embody the whole Gospel. Because in order not to speak ill of someone, he had not to think ill of them. In order not to think ill of them, he had to not judge them. In order not to judge them, he had to be compassionate. In order to be compassionate, he first had to see his own need for compassion. In order to see his own need for compassion he had to admit of his own sinfulness. In order to admit of his sinfulness, he had to be humble. And in order to acquire true humility, he had to love God and his neighbor as himself. And upon this, says Christ, "hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt 22:37-39).

The relationship between the Scriptures and the modern contemplative is no less demanding. Those who strive to embody the Scriptures must approach them not merely with the critical distance of a historian but with the receptivity of a disciple, not as a tourist but as a pilgrim. While critical readings of Scripture are invaluable as a source of theological information, an embodied reading seeks spiritual transformation. Rooted in the incarnation, the apex of an embodied reading is nothing less than the realization of oneself as an alter Christus. The point is not to arrive at a definitive interpretation of the text but to arrive at a more intimate relationship with the interior Christ. The gospels, after all, were written not that we might know about Jesus but that we may know him who continues to be incarnate in us.

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Echoing the pattern of the incarnation, contemplative silence for the Christian rises up in the midst of the Word, not apart from it. “In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was made flesh” (John 1:1, 14). So too do the words of Scripture enter the silence of our own flesh.

Here again we are reminded of the slatted fence, comprised of the words of Scripture and the spaces between them. Silence amid the word. Beyond is an interior terrain replete with mountain peaks and misty valleys, rocky vistas and dense forests. Yet nothing is as it seems. Union with God is not achieved by human efforts to climb the mountain peaks but by Christ’s descent into the misty valley of human history. Each of us must walk the interior landscape of the gospel in the solitude of our own hearts, only to realize that as members of

Christ’s body we never walk in isolation. We must each find our own way along the path of contemplation, if only to discover Christ is the Way. To touch on the gift of one’s deification is to realize the gospels are not ends in themselves but point invariably to Christ within. “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; but it is they that testify to me” (John 5:39).

+ *Contemplating Christ*, 32-34. Fr. Vincent Pizzuto, PhD.

WE AWAKEN IN CHRIST'S BODY

We awaken in Christ's body  
as Christ awakens our bodies,  
and my poor hand is Christ, He enters  
my foot, and is infinitely me.  
I move my hand, and wonderfully  
my hand becomes Christ, becomes all of Him  
(for God is indivisibly whole, seamless in His Godhood). I move my foot, and at once  
He appears like a flash of lightning.  
Do my words seem blasphemous? —  
Then open your heart to Him  
and let yourself receive the one  
who is opening to you so deeply.  
For if we genuinely love Him,  
we wake up inside Christ's body  
where all our body, all over,  
every most hidden part of it,  
is realized in joy as Him,  
and He makes us, utterly, real,  
and everything that is hurt, everything  
that seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful, maimed,  
ugly, irreparably  
damaged, is in Him transformed  
and recognized as whole, as lovely,  
and radiant in His light  
he awakens as the Beloved  
in every last part of our body.<sup>1</sup>

*St. Symeon the New Theologian (10<sup>th</sup> Century)*

<sup>1</sup> Symeon the New Theologian, in *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry*, ed. Stephen Mitchell (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 38–39.