



The Ongoing Renewal of CATHOLICISM

Brennan R. Hill

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CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Jesus of Nazareth	9
A Pilgrimage to Jerusalem	10
Back in Nazareth	12
A Call to Renew His Religion	14
The Mission Begins	18
Game Time	31
The Last Days	32
The Process of Crucifixion	34
The Resurrection	36
Chapter 2: The Bible	38
The Old Testament	40
The New Testament	47
Reading the Bible	56
Exercises in Biblical Interpretation	58
Conclusion	65
Chapter 3: The Christian Church	67
Leadership	69
Constantine's Era	74
Christianity Spreads	75
Great Divisions	81
Fast Forward Forty Years	93
Conclusion	96

Chapter 4: Christian Divisions and Efforts for Unity	98
East and West Drift Apart	100
The Pre-Reformation	102
Ground Zero for Reform	107
The Ecumenical Movement	116
Interchurch Marriages	121
Conclusion	126
Chapter 5: Interfaith Dialogue	128
Judaism	129
Islam	134
Hinduism	144
Buddhism	150
Catholics and Other Faiths	155
Interfaith Dialogue	156
Conclusion	159
Chapter 6: A Sacramental People	161
The Sacramental Principle	162
The Christian Sacraments	167
Conclusion	189
Chapter 7: The Liturgy and Eucharist	191
Liturgy	192
Foundations of Christian Liturgy	192
Eucharist	205
Conclusion	216

Chapter 8: Women and the Church 218

- Jewish Traditions. 219
- Jesus’ Views. 221
- Some Outstanding Christian Women 225
- The Women’s Movement 227
- Of cial Catholic Positions on Women. 231
- New Feminist Interpretations 234
- Feminist Views on the Church 241
- Conclusion 244

Chapter 9: Modern Catholic Social Teaching 247

- A Brief Historical Overview. 248
- The Roman Synod on Justice. 253
- Catholic Social Teaching in the United States 257
- The Progression of Catholic Social Teaching 259
- Some Key Notions in Catholic Social Teaching 261
- Some Heroes for Social Justice 271
- Conclusion 279

Chapter 10: Christian Faith and the Environment 281

- The Old Testament 282
- The Christian Scriptures 286
- Christology and Saving the Earth. 290
- Jesus as Savior 291
- Christian Sacraments 293
- The Churches Speak Out 297
- Feminine Perspectives 302
- An Environmental Ethic. 305
- Conclusion 309

Index 313



1 Jesus of Nazareth

It all began with people following a young carpenter from Nazareth. His name was Jesus (Yeshua, Joshua), and he was born into a poor Jewish family in a small village in Galilee, a northern province of Palestine. His parents were Mary and Joseph, who had been married as teenagers, in a union arranged by their parents. Like most Palestinian Jews of the first century, Jesus and his family probably lived in a tiny clay-brick house with two levels. The lower level was for the protection of their animals at night (perhaps a goat for milk, a sheep for wool, and some chickens); the upper level, raised several feet, was for the family meals and sleeping. A lean-to outside served as a carpenter's shop where Joseph did his work and instructed Jesus in the trade. The rooftop provided space for family sharing and prayer at the end of the day.

Life in Nazareth was simple but arduous. As sharecroppers on land owned by the wealthy, families grew their own

food. They also daily carried water from a common well, made their own clothes, and eked out a living working at trades. Their workday was long, beginning at dawn and ending at sundown.

Jesus' family members were devout Jews. Prayer, discussion of the Scriptures, and acts of mercy and kindness were integral to their lives. On the Sabbath they would gather with neighbors in a central synagogue for prayer and instruction by the elders. The elderly, the sick, and the diseased had to be cared for, and no doubt Jesus learned compassion and the healing power of God by sharing in this service.

Though our knowledge of the particulars of Jesus' life is quite limited, imagining a biographical sketch such as this, based on what we do know of the families of his time, can be helpful in understanding his story.

A Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

Occasionally, once they had saved enough money, the family might join a caravan and make the difficult hundred-mile journey south to Jerusalem for Passover or one of the other big feasts. They would face many dangers: poisonous snakes, wild animals, and hostile people, including thieves waiting to pounce on vulnerable pilgrims. In Jerusalem they would stay with friends or relatives and then mingle with the million or more pilgrims to celebrate one of the great Jewish feasts at the magnificent Temple built by Herod.

Jerusalem must have been a culture shock for the country boy, Jesus. The Romans had taken over his country half a century before, so he would have seen the fearsome and brutal Roman mercenaries marching about just waiting for someone to step out of line. On a hill outside the city were lines of crosses, where those convicted of rebellion writhed in pain or slumped over already dead. Wild dogs leaped for their flesh and birds of prey zoomed down to tear at their bodies.

For the first time, Jesus would catch a glimpse of the Jewish leaders. Outside their academy, the learned and wealthy scribes would be instructing their privileged students on the intricacies of Jewish theology. Jesus

himself had received only simple instruction at synagogue and from his parents. His own skills in reading the Hebrew scrolls were quite modest, and he had never learned to write. But he had learned the core Jewish beliefs about a God who was a loving Creator. Of the hundreds of Jewish laws on purification and ritual, his hard-working community knew little, nor had they much interest in learning about all the punishments demanded by the Jewish authorities on behalf of a judging and avenging God. Jesus had learned from his people that God was love and that loving God and one's neighbor as oneself was the heart of the Jewish faith.

Jesus would have encountered many others on pilgrimage. There were the Pharisees, hustling about doing social work among the poor and modeling how to obey all the Jewish laws to a T. Some had a reputation for being much too legalistic and others were known to be hypocrites, teaching one thing and doing another. At the Temple were the wealthy high priests, men who led royal lives with their multiple wives in magnificent mansions. They lived off the monies they collected from farmers tilling the many acres they owned, the sale of millions of birds and lambs for Temple sacrifices, and the taxes they collected from their people. They had sold out to the conquering Romans; a small price they thought for the sumptuous lifestyle they received in return.

Pressing through the crowded streets, Jesus would have seen the tall, slender Essenes, dressed in white robes and hurrying to their secluded monasteries where they lived in communities that rejected the Judaism known to Jesus. He might even have glimpsed someone preaching revolution against the Roman occupiers or starting a riot by stabbing a Roman soldier or someone who sympathized with the Romans.

Jesus would have seen some of the countless merchants arriving in the city with camel caravans carrying a vast array of goods, including precious glassware from Tyre and magnificent linens from Babylon. Jesus had seen such caravans pass near his own village, but had never seen the camels or the merchants up close. He must have wondered where those buying such exotic goods came up with all that money! On a poor carpenter's wages, he could barely afford a new pair of sandals or a set of earthen bowls for his mother.

There were many other sights as well: the fishermen selling their dried fish from the Sea of Galilee, slaves being sold on the auction block, and chariot races and wild animal shows in the hippodrome. There were musicals and plays in the theater for those who could afford them. Outside homes of the wealthy, Jesus might have glimpsed sumptuous banquets and seen exotic dancers overflowing into the streets. Along the roads were many beggars looking for a coin or two and prostitutes trying to drum up business.

Jerusalem must have been a world that excited the young Jesus and at the same time deeply disturbed him. Was there anything he could do to help bring his people back to their treasured values of love, humility, compassion, and forgiveness? Could he somehow show that the poor were blessed and that there was no such thing as an outcast, because each person was a child of God, with the precious gift of life within and called to love forever? Children of God should not be enslaved or brutalized by violence. There was too much greed, corruption, and hypocrisy. There should be no outcasts! The diseased were not cursed by God and should be given healing and proper care. The prostitutes, many of whom were sexually abused at home or cast out by their husbands for other women, should be given back their dignity. Goods and food should be shared, for God provides enough for all. If Jesus embarked on such a mission, would he himself be cast out, or even find himself nailed to one of those crosses on the hill outside the city?

Back in Nazareth

Jesus spent most of his life in the tiny village of Nazareth. He spent his childhood playing on the hillsides, watching sheep, and helping his parents with the many daily chores of rural life. Nazareth, though a Jewish ghetto, was not isolated. Nearby was the sophisticated city of Sepphoris. The Romans had destroyed this city after a Jewish rebellion, but during Jesus' lifetime it had been rebuilt into a prosperous and cultured place. About twenty-five miles northwest was the lovely area of Mt. Carmel, overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. This was the area where the great prophet Elijah preached. About the same distance northeast was the

fishing village of Capernaum, where Jesus seems to have moved as a young adult, and which was the hometown of some of his original followers. It is quite possible that Jesus would have gone to these areas to bring back wood for his carpentry projects or for work on construction jobs.

We often see Jesus portrayed as a tall, thin, blue-eyed preacher in a snow-white robe. In actuality, if he were average in height for that time, Jesus would have been just over five feet tall. Many years of hard physical work outdoors would have hardened his muscles and calloused his hands. As a Semite, he would have been dark skinned, with dark eyes and hair. Standing in his rough, unbleached wool robe, his feet dusty from hiking and his face leathered by the sun, Jesus might have been a rugged-looking individual indeed.



Student Reflection

“This description makes Jesus more real to me. Now I realize that he was just like me and had to experience growing up, learning, and trying to find out what he should do with his life, just like I do.”

It seems as though Jesus might have had brothers and sisters, for they are mentioned in the Gospels. Although the theological and historical questions surrounding this are complex, the references to Jesus' siblings can be considered here. Jesus' most notable likely sibling was James, who later would be chosen to lead the church in Jerusalem. Jesus' father, Joseph, seems to have died when Jesus was young. Though it was customary for Jews at that time to marry and raise children, Jesus does not seem to have been married. At least, no mention of his having had a wife or children is made in the Gospels. Could it be that after his brothers and sisters married, he chose to remain home to take care of his widowed mother? Possibly, just like many young people today, he was too busy with

Jesus might have had brothers and sisters



work and then his ministry to have time to marry. Whatever the case may be, Jesus appears to have stayed at home in Nazareth working at his trade until he was nearly thirty. Then he moved to Capernaum to begin a new phase of his life, one that would be more public.

A Call to Renew His Religion

Mark, the earliest gospel, recounts Jesus' step into public life with his baptism in the river Jordan. There, John the Baptizer, who may have been a relative and mentor to Jesus, called his fellow Jews to change their lives and symbolically wash away their sins in the river shallows. Although the relationship between the two men isn't entirely clear, their meeting carries importance.

John was a craggy desert dweller, a recluse who wore camel skins and ate locusts and wild honey that he found in the wilderness. He prayed for his people and occasionally came forth as a fearsome prophet to warn them of God's punishment. In part, he seems to have seen his mission as one of setting the stage for his younger, more laid-back, and less-experienced protégé, Jesus.

It must have been a proud day for John the Baptizer when his young student, Jesus, came into the river to become part of this great symbolic washing and celebration of God's forgiveness. Mark's gospel tells us that when Jesus came up from his baptism, he had a moving experience of being beloved by his God and filled with the Spirit.

How It All Got Started

The "Jesus movement" all began when this young construction worker, Jesus, left his home and family and began a mission to reform his own religion of Judaism. Like all religions, his had veered off track from its best teachings and traditions. In his home life in Nazareth and in his prayer life, he had experienced God as Abba (dear parent) and had come to strongly believe that love, compassion (especially for outcasts), healing,

and justice were at the heart of his religion. The legalism, hypocrisy, harsh judgment, and fear of God that he had so often seen in his religion were simply not acceptable to this young reformer from the rural north.

A People Divided

There were serious divisions among Jesus' people, each with its own take on what it meant to be a good Jew. There were the Pharisees, with their emphasis on the scrupulous following of all the hundreds of laws on food, dress, worship, and daily life; the Sadducees, who gave themselves to power and luxury and did not believe in God's providence or even life after death; and the scribes, learned intellectuals who wrote commentaries on the law but who often took their positions too seriously and expected always to be given the best places at events. There was the beginning of a movement of Jews (sometimes called Zealots) who wanted to use violence to throw off the Roman yoke. There were the Essenes, who did not recognize the official Temple or priesthood, but kept to themselves in monasteries, preparing for the final coming to their communities alone. There were the hated Samaritans in the central province, who had their own temple, priesthood, and beliefs. And there were the Herodians, who ruled ruthlessly as puppet leaders for the Romans.

A People Oppressed

Every Passover, Jesus celebrated how God had rescued the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt and given them a land they could call their own. They had become a great nation, only to become divided and then constantly conquered by other kingdoms: Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and now the Roman Empire. Jesus' people had been exiled, dominated, and oppressed for centuries. He knew the iron hand of the Roman occupiers: they had pushed his family back into the hinterlands, where they were forced to eke out a living and pay heavy taxes on rented land, on what little they earned, and on their crops, herds, boats—even the fish they caught. Any refusal to pay taxes, any attempt to rebel or stir up trouble

would be punished by either selling the offender into slavery or subjecting him to crucifixion. Jesus had become convinced that violence begets violence and that only nonviolence would produce true peace.

A Retreat to the Desert

In the East it has been customary for monks and prophets to prepare themselves for their mission by spending some time in the desert. During Jesus' time, there was a large monastery of Essenes dedicated to prayer, fasting, chastity, and ascetical living located in the harsh desert near Qumran by the Dead Sea. At this point in his life, Jesus seemed to be experiencing a deep call to leave home and take to the road as a prophet. Not far from the Qumran area, near Jericho, Jesus entered the wilderness for an extended time to pray and prepare himself for the difficult mission of bringing reform to his fellow Jews.

The desert is a stark and dangerous place, and yet a landscape that has its own unique beauty. It was a symbolic place for Jesus to pray, as his people had wandered there for many years looking for the land that Yahweh had promised them. In the desert one is alone with the self, stripped of all protection and security and deprived of interaction with others. Here there is just the self and God, and few distractions other than one's own imaginings, which have to be kept under close control. The sounds of howling animals at night could conjure up images that could bring panic. The hissing and rustling of snakes and scorpions could induce terror. And thirst, the burning sun, and the occasional dust-up from the wind could depress, discourage, and even cause one to hallucinate.

The desert is a place to learn about the true self, the purpose of one's life, the meaning of suffering and death, and where one stands with God. Jesus was now thirty, rather old in those days to just be leaving home and setting out on his own. From the time he was a child, he had felt an intense intimacy with his God. At times it was as though God spoke to him when he rose at sunrise to recite a psalm or when his mother held him before he went to sleep. He felt God's power work through him when he cared for

and brought healing to the elderly, the sick, and the diseased in his village. He had felt the Creator's power when he built a house for a newly married couple, made furniture for a newborn, and built a bridge across a dangerous wadi near the well. He had felt close to his God on his trip to Carmel by the sea for lumber, on his hikes to Mt. Tabor, and during his walks along the beautiful Sea of Galilee.

Jesus had come to believe within the very fibers of his being that God was found in love, humility, compassion, and forgiveness. Greed, hatred, violence, and oppression were all the absence of God. He must go and tell his people to come back to the faith of Abraham and Moses. He must confront the hypocrisy of some of his Jewish leaders and the brutality of some of the Romans occupying his country. He must raise up the masses that were left as frightened outcasts, and teach them and their oppressors that everyone is a beloved child of God. He must help his people realize that the power of God, the reign of God, was with each of them and that with such power they could bring about peace and justice.

In the desert Jesus had to face his own demons. If he left the security of his home and trade, he would risk homelessness and hunger and face the temptation to abandon his mission and become a con man or magician to survive. In reflecting on his new call, he could see himself blindly throwing himself into his work with neither discernment nor prayer, foolishly believing that God would miraculously save him from harm. He would have to rely on the bread of God's care and revelation through discernment and prayer. As Jesus stretched out under the burning desert sun, he realized he would face opposition from both the Jewish and Roman leaders that he was about to challenge. There would be the strong temptation to become part of their corrupt leadership and sell out for a comfortable position in Jerusalem. Within his heart he could feel the fear and vulnerability, the danger that he might fail in his mission. He felt the strong drive toward security and the possibility that he might become part of the corrupt system he was challenging. Was it possible that this mission would bring him to torture and death? Would he have the courage to stay the course, or would he back off and run like a coward?

The Mission Begins

At first, Jesus was not sure when to start. He was almost thirty, which was well along in age at that time. Upon hearing of John's beheading for exposing Herod's immorality, Jesus saw that it was time for him to preach the reign of God, the loving and saving presence of God among his people.

Luke tells us that Jesus began his mission in his native Galilee, where at first his preaching in the synagogues was received with great enthusiasm. As he became famous and honored, he must have thought: "This is going to be easy. Why was I so worried and so slow to get started." But then one Sabbath, Jesus stopped at his own synagogue in Nazareth, which he had attended since childhood. He was asked to read, and opening the scroll to Isaiah, he read a moving passage:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind. (Lk 4:18)

When he finished the reading, Jesus sat down and told the congregation that all of this was being fulfilled today. At first, they were in awe, but when he started comparing himself to the prophets and chiding them for their lack of faith, they became angry. They ran him out of town and some even threatened to throw him off a hill. He was nearly killed on his first venture out, and by his very own Nazarenes!

Jesus then moved to the fishing village of Capernaum where the people seemed more open to his teaching. In Capernaum, Jesus decided he was going to need some help, some close followers who could travel with him and carry on his mission should something happen to him. The first group he approached was the fishermen. They were a rough and rugged lot, working from sunrise, rowing their heavy boats and throwing their soggy nets into the sea, often at risk of drowning as the wild storms rose over the hills without warning. Jesus knew that as tradesmen like him, they were subject to heavy Roman taxes on the purchase of nets and boats, on use of docks, and on every fish they caught and sold. Like him, they had

worked for years under these oppressive taxes, paying through the nose while the wealthy in Jerusalem raked in their share of the revenues and then sent the rest to the Romans. Many Romans lived sumptuously of these tariffs, and in Rome so much wealth flowed in from the provinces that citizens did not have to pay taxes at all.

Jesus had known the oppression of the greedy and corrupt Herodians, high priests, and Romans all his life. And he was well aware that if anyone spoke up or rebelled, they would be sold into slavery or even crucified. Facing these risks, Jesus wanted to start a community of people who would drop out of the system, leave their trades, stop paying the taxes, and preach love, healing, and forgiveness. Like the prophets of old, Jesus would start a movement that would challenge the evils and injustices around them and try to lead people onto another path, another way of life based on love, compassion, and concern about those who were cast out.

The Call of the Disciples

Jesus first approached a rugged fisherman known for his quick temper and impetuous nature, a man named Simon. Jesus called Simon and also his brother Andrew and then two other powerful fishermen known as “Sons of Thunder”—James and John. A little later, Jesus startled his little band by calling someone they hated, someone who actually collected their taxes, keeping much for himself, and then betrayed his own Jewish people by sending the rest of their hard-earned money to the Romans. His name was Levi, and Jesus further upset his followers by going to Levi’s house to share a meal with him and a whole group of tax collectors. Jesus’ followers grew further dismayed at the group Jesus was assembling. There was Philip, who was personally called by Jesus and who brought along his friend Nathaniel. Jesus also called Bartholomew, Thaddeus, and Thomas, the latter always a hard sell. There was another James and another Simon, who had been with the Zealots, and Judas Iscariot, who had been dagger man for the revolutionaries.

Women Disciples

Jesus also called women to join his community of disciples. To our knowledge, no Jewish leader had ever done this. Often in Jesus' religion, women were held to be regularly unclean as a result of their menstruation and seductive through their supposed wily ways and emotional weakness. Thus women were kept in the background: they were not allowed near the Temple sanctuary, were segregated in the synagogue, and were not formally instructed in the Torah. They were seldom to be in public, but if they had to be, they were to be completely covered and were not to speak to men. Girls came of age at twelve and a half. They would then be married and become, in some ways, the property of their husband. Their value in many families depended much on the production of children and service to their husband. Failure in these areas sometimes meant that women were set aside through divorce and forced to live in poverty; some fell into slavery or even prostitution. Widows had few rights of inheritance and were subject to the authority of male in-laws.

Jesus was quite radical in his position on women. He saw all people as children of Abba, as brothers and sisters. He was familiar with the male images of God—father, warrior, and husband. But Jesus was equally aware that God was imaged in his Scriptures as a seamstress, a nurse, a midwife, and a loving mother. He often ignored the taboos of his religion: Jesus talked with women in public and even took them by the hand and healed them. He opposed the unjust divorce laws and reached out to widows and prostitutes. He drew all children, boys and girls, to his heart.

So many stories in the Gospels carry memories of Jesus' care for women. He saved the life of the woman who was about to be stoned to death for adultery; he raised up the prostitute who washed his feet at Simon the Pharisee's house as a repentant woman of love and hospitality. He accepted the often-married Samaritan woman, talked with her publicly, and sent her into her village to preach his gospel. He taught Martha and Mary in their own home; cured Peter's mother-in-law; healed a woman from her constant hemorrhaging; raised from the dead the widow's son and the little daughter of Jairus. He cured Mary Magdalene of serious illness.

But Jesus' most radical decision regarding women was to call them to be his disciples and travel with him in his little band.

Mary of Magdala was one of his favorites. There is no evidence whatsoever that Mary had been a prostitute. Indeed, Mary was a woman of means who wanted to be part of the group and help provide them with food and other necessities. He also chose Joanna, whose husband was the minister of finance for Herod and who had left the luxury of the palace to become a disciple. And, of course, there were other women who were closely associated with the community, including Mary, Jesus' mother; Martha and Mary, Jesus' close friends from Bethany; Susanna, and according to Luke, "many others." For all, it meant a new way of life with this young preacher and healer who taught with his own authority and seemed bent on challenging the religious and political structures of his time. It was indeed a motley crew and Jesus would have to have strong leadership qualities to mold this diverse group into a movement.



Student Reflection

"I have always felt kind of left out in the Catholic Church. It seems like a male operation! I am so glad to hear that Jesus had different ideas about women and wanted them to be disciples."

Miracles

As the small band took its first hesitant steps with Jesus through Galilee, they were amazed at how intimate he seemed to be with God and how divine power seemed to work through him. He would rise before the rest from his mat on the ground, go aside, and be lost in prayer. After breakfast, he would lead them along dusty roads into the small towns and villages. Along the way, in isolated areas, they would encounter the much-feared lepers, outcasts who were considered by many to be punished by God

with their affliction. Jesus would stop, befriend them, offer them respect and love, and even touch their open wounds and heal them. Jesus always found it impossible to believe that disease and deformity were sent by God to punish sin. He experienced God as a loving Creator who blessed and healed. This was the God that seemed to be working through Jesus' rough and calloused hands.

In the villages Jesus would encounter people overcome by convulsions and mad screaming so that they seemed possessed, and yet he would tenderly approach them and bring them peace. At one point he was at a home in Capernaum and when word got out, people crowded into the little house until it was jammed. Outside four men carrying their paralyzed friend couldn't get in, so they took off the roof and lowered their friend down. Jesus forgave the paralyzed man's sins, cured him of his paralysis, and then stood him up to walk on his own.

People were amazed, for they had never seen anything like this. The disciples had heard about a few such miracles in their Scriptures: Abimelech and his family had been healed of their afflictions, Saul had been healed of an evil spirit, and Elijah and Elisha had both restored life to people. But these were a very long time ago and were rarities, nothing like this, with nearly every day people healed of illnesses, the blind given their sight, the deaf their hearing restored, cripples able to walk again, evil spirits driven out, even the dead brought back to life. It was as though God's power was exploding all around them through this rugged and compassionate young man. It was awesome and yet at the same time frightening, because Jesus was beginning to attract a lot of attention, even making enemies among the religious leaders who thought he was acting through the power of Satan, not God. Those in charge of the Temple insisted that any such cures be verified by them and accompanied by offerings to Moses. Here was a young upstart peasant, dabbling on his own with powers that must be evil, and outside of Temple control!



people had never seen anything like this

compassion, and forgiveness is “the Way” to live one’s life and that neither suffering nor death can ultimately prevail against such a life. He called people to a conversion. Jesus taught that those who believe in him and live as he did will have life eternal.

Activities

1. Divide into teams and have each team prepare and offer a presentation on one of the following films on Jesus: *Jesus Christ: Superstar*; *Godspell*; *Jesus of Nazareth*; *The Last Temptation of Christ*; *Jesus of Montreal*; Mel Gibson’s *Passion*; *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*. Most of these are now on DVD, so it is easy to find clips and comment on them. PowerPoint can be used to highlight key points.
2. Form small groups to discuss miracle stories and parables and then dramatize them before the class.

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