

Foreword by **Scott Hahn**



FACE TO FACE
WITH JESUS

Reflections for a Disciple



BRUNO FORTE

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With a foreword by Scott Hahn



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This little book contains the meditations of the “spiritual exercises for everyone” that I gave to a large and attentive crowd over the course of three evenings during Lent of 2012 in a large church in Chieti, Italy. I dedicate the following pages to those listeners, as well as to all who will imitate them in their desire to walk with Jesus in the Gospel of Mark.

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Foreword

Long before I was a theologian—and even before I called myself a Christian—I was a musician. Though I spoke not a word of Italian, I knew the word *forte* because it appeared often on sheet music. To a musician, *forte* means strong, bold, loud. You see it on music that aims to make an impression.

It's a word that suits this book and its author. Archbishop Bruno Forte is an eminent churchman, a world-renowned scholar, and a passionate Christian man.

His zeal is evident in his manifold accomplishments. He holds doctorates in both philosophy and theology, and he has taught in both disciplines at prestigious universities throughout Europe. He is a prolific author, best known for his eight-volume *Simbolica Ecclesiale* and four-volume *Dialogica*. For a solid decade he served on the Church's

International Theological Commission, the elite group of theologians who advise the Holy See in doctrinal matters of major importance. He was one of the founding members of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization. Since 2004 he has been Archbishop of Chieti-Vasto in Italy.

He is a scholar of the first rank, but before he is a scholar, he is a pastor, and before he is a pastor, he is a disciple. Yet these various roles do not divide his life. I know him only through his work, but his words are the product of a remarkably integrated life. He writes with the depth of a man who has spent long years in research, but also with the passion of a preacher who spends hours on his knees in prayer. In the pages of his work, he seems to say to us the words that the disciples said at Emmaus: “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?” (Lk 24:32 RSV).

Archbishop Forte is a scholar unashamed of his love for Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who has inspired the man to earn two doctorates and write so many books. Archbishop Forte is the rare scholar who cannot help but use exclamation points when he discusses matters of divine revelation. “God Speaks!” he proclaims in a subheading in one of his pastoral letters—as if the fact would be ill-served by an unadorned declarative sentence.

That pastoral letter, written in 2006, bore an evocative title: “The Word for Living: Sacred Scripture and the Beauty of God.” It is a rich document, written to address what the Archbishop recognizes as a postmodern crisis, a longing that is frustrated and unfulfilled. God permits this for a reason, he explains, quoting the Prophet Amos: “‘Behold, the days are coming,’ says the Lord GOD, ‘when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD’” (Amos 8:11 RSV). The Archbishop continues:

I recognize this hunger in the need for love that is in each of us, men and women of this postmodern time. We are becoming more and more prisoners of our solitude. Only an infinite love can satisfy the expectation that burns inside of us: Only the God who is love can say to us that we are not alone in this world, and that our house is in the heavenly city where there will no longer be neither sorrow nor death. “From that city,” writes Augustine, “our Father has sent us letters, he has sent us the Scripture, and from this awakens our desire to return home.”¹

For Archbishop Forte, those letters from our Father are not simply historical artifacts. They are life’s blood—a

1. Bruno Forte, “The Word for Living: Sacred Scripture and the Beauty of God Pastoral Letter for 2006–2007,” no. 1. Last accessed June 2013 at <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/archbishop-bruno-forte-on-scripture>.

transfusion of divine life. They are as “living and active” (Heb 4:12) today as they were the day they were written. Our Father inspired them for each of us—for you and for me—as if we would be their only reader or listener.

He speaks this way of the entirety of Scripture, both the Old Testament and the New. For the Archbishop, as for the sacred authors, it’s all about Christ; and it’s not merely about him in the way a biography is about its subject. “It shares his power,”² Archbishop Forte exclaims. The words of Scripture are revelations from God, so they provide knowledge we could not attain through our own efforts (even if we were to earn two doctorates). The words of Scripture are inspired by God; he breathes them into being as surely as he breathed life into Adam.

The words of Scripture share God’s power, especially when they are encountered in the Church—in catechesis, in study, but especially in liturgy. It is in the Church’s worship that the Word comes to us with sacramental power—with *his* power. In the liturgy, the Word is made flesh and dwells among us, and we are made partakers of that flesh.

What Archbishop Forte said in general terms about Scripture in his pastoral letter, he applies here to a

2. *Ibid*, no. 2.

particular book of the Bible, the Gospel According to Saint Mark.

Face to Face with Jesus is a personal and pastoral book, a series of brief spiritual exercises intended to move us to a deeper encounter with Jesus, by means of *lectio divina*—disciplined, prayerful consideration of the Word of God.

It is a work, like the Lord's own preaching, capable of reaching the hearts and minds of multitudes. It is the fruit of deep prayer. Yet it is also the fruit of decades of careful scholarship and academic engagement.

The Archbishop knows that most people go to the Bible because they want to find its spiritual sense. But he knows, too, that the spiritual sense of Scripture rests on the foundation of the literal-historical sense: *historia fundamentum est*. God entered history at a particular time and place, among a certain people, and said and did specific things. The Word took flesh. Thus, all our spiritual interpretation of Scripture must be grounded in literal and historical facts.

And so Archbishop Forte helps us to understand the ancient catechetical form and purpose of each of the four gospels. Saint Mark's presents a manual for the catechumens, for those members of the primitive communities who were beginning their journey—their walk with Jesus, as we see in the subtitle of this book.

As a result, this is an informative book, but more importantly it is a *formative* book. A pastor and spiritual director—who is himself an intentional disciple of Jesus—has taken us into his tutelage. That is our privilege. One of the Church’s masters of evangelization is evangelizing us, and he is doing so with a proven instrument. Mark’s Gospel succeeded quite well in its work of evangelizing and catechizing the Church’s first generation, and it speaks with the same power—divine power—to our own generation.

When we read the evangelists the right way, we never cease to be evangelized. Conversion is thus life long and daily, as Jesus—the living Word who proclaims the Evangel through the evangelists—leads us along the ways of the interior life, from purification, all the way through illumination, to communion.

That is the way we walk in the course of this book, with a spiritual guide who is strong, bold: *Forté*.

SCOTT HAHN

Preface

This is a small book. It is the kind that is held in the palms of your hands, as Edmond Jabès has said:

“Do you know why our books of wisdom and of prayers are small?” the master asked his disciple. “Because they are books that contain a secret, and a secret should not be disclosed. Prudence of the soul. Love is expressed quietly. The book of our masters is the size of our hands, open only for us.”¹

Opened toward heaven! And this is how this small book should be read, because it is a type of “spiritual exercises” for all people and for each person in particular.

1. Edmond Jabès, *Uno straniero con, sotto il braccio, un libro di piccolo formato*, trans. A. Folin (Milano: SE, 1991), 19.

The spiritual exercises are explained very well by the one who gave them their definitive form in the history of Christian spirituality: Saint Ignatius of Loyola. He writes at the beginning of his book (also small!):

By the term, spiritual exercises, is meant every way of examining one's conscience, of meditating, of contemplating, of praying vocally and mentally, and of performing other spiritual actions . . . diverse means to prepare and dispose the soul to rid itself of all disordered affections, and, after eliminating them, to seek and find the will of God in the management of one's life for the salvation of the soul.²

The objective of the spiritual exercises is, therefore, "to conquer oneself and regulate one's life" (no. 21), in order to realize always more the destination for which we were created, "to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord" (no. 23). For this reason, the pathway of the exercises involves three main stages, so important also to the great spiritual tradition: the purgative way, the illuminative way, and the unitive way.

The first stage, the purgative way, indicates a change of heart and of life: *deformata reformare*. This consists in decisively reforming that which separates us from God. It directs us to verify our choices in the plan that the eternal

2. *Spiritual Exercises*, First Annotation.

Lord has for us: “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12).

The purpose of the second stage, the illuminative way, is to conform one’s heart and life to the living God: *reformata conformare* being the Latin expression according to the spiritual tradition. In this stage, one enters into the experience of contemplative prayer and listens to the word of God while walking in the ways of silence.

Finally, the third stage, the unitive way, helps us to become partakers of divine life given from above. This stage bears full fruit in the conversion of heart and in striving for holiness according to the plan that the Father has for each of us: *conformata confirmare*. This confirms the divine work in our hearts and in our lives with the seal of the Holy Spirit.

These exercises, set out here in a simple and essential format, accompany Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God, through Mark’s account. The reason for the choice of this particular Gospel will be explained in the following reflections. Suffice it to say here that Mark’s Gospel (also a small book) presents itself as a type of manual for the catechumens, well suited to accompany those who desire and seek an encounter with Jesus.

It is precisely for this reason that the “spiritual exercises” that follow should be considered *for everyone*. They are for those who already believe and who desire to

encounter the Lord of their life in an increasingly deeper and livelier way. Yet, they are also for inquiring non-believers who may want to get to know this Jesus of Nazareth and the choices that he made and proposed to us and to those who are open to a challenge and to what, I believe, is a promise for everyone.

B. F.

Easter, 2012



Why the Gospel of Mark?

The Gospel of Mark is the shortest and oldest of the four Gospels. It is sixteen chapters long, totaling 678 verses, and has been called the “Gospel of one night.”¹ No one who reads it, even quickly, can be unaffected by the tension that runs through it, since it is concise and strongly engaging. First of all, the tension of the past runs through to the present; the account of the story of Jesus of Nazareth is created to speak to today’s hearers, to whom it is presented. But there is also the tension between the present and the past, as if the questions of the present-day

1. See Benoît Standaert, *Marco: Vangelo di una notte, vangelo per la vita*, 3 vols (Bologna: EDB, 2011).

believer point to the origin of the faith. The earthly ministry of Jesus is told as the point of reference to which the believer must turn in order to walk with the Son of Man/Son of God on the journey from darkness to light. It is a journey that repeats itself throughout the book in a spiral of successive stages, concluding in the final profession of the centurion at the foot of the cross, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (Mk 15:39).

Just so, Mark's account presents itself as a *life journey*, one that challenges and progresses, culminating in the experience of the Risen One. Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini writes:

Mark presented a catechesis, a manual for the catechumen . . . for those members of the primitive communities who were beginning their catechumenal journey. . . . Matthew's . . . is the Gospel of the catechist; that is, the Gospel which gives the catechist a number of doctrines, prescriptions, and exhortations. Luke is the doctor's Gospel; that is, the Gospel for the one who wants an in-depth historical-salvific treatment of the mystery with a broader vision of it. Finally, John's is the Gospel of the priest, which gives the mature and contemplative Christian a unified vision of the various mysteries of salvation.

Mark is the first of these four manuals . . . centered, therefore, on the catechumenal journey. It can be summed up in the words of Jesus to his disciples: "To

you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables” (Mk 4:11).

Mark’s Gospel shows us how, through the parables, through the *exterior* scene of the mystery of the kingdom, we can enter *inside* it and receive this secret.²

It is a challenging journey, placing before us important decisions to be made about our lives and our choices. In this sense, the narrative of Mark is “like a play, where the outcome is not obvious. . . . Each reader is invited to journey with the characters in the play both in their search for the true identity of Jesus as well as in the discovery of his or her own identity.”³ In this light, Peter—a central character in the story—appears as the voice of the catechumen, who opens himself gradually, not without resistance, to receive the revelation of the Son of God. “The Gospel of Mark presents itself as the pathway of a journey ranging from fear and doubt to the joy and peace of the encounter. . . . The drama of Jesus Christ is presented as the parable to which every human being is called: to lose his

2. Carlo Maria Martini, *The Spiritual Journey of the Apostles: Growth in the Gospel of Mark*, trans. K.D. Whitehead (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1991), 7–8.

3. R. Fabris, *Marco* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 2005), 14.

life in order to find it.”⁴ The road on which Jesus travels from Galilee to Jerusalem is not, in short, a mere geographical and chronological route; rather, it is a journey that can be considered symbolic. And it invites others to follow as well.

Relating to this idea, one could affirm that in Mark’s account, Jesus presents his identity, as if veiled, in a *progressive journey*. He does so in order to propose not impose himself on one’s freedom to consent. At its culmination is an affirmative profession of faith, proposed at the outset in the title, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mk 1:1). The final profession is placed in the mouth of a pagan, the Roman centurion, at the foot of the cross, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mk 15:39). The itinerary leading to this profession is made up of an alternating series of revelations and secrets. This has been called the messianic secret.⁵ The term refers to the attitude of Jesus during his public ministry of hiding his identity as the Messiah. Sometimes he does so to the disciples (Mk 8:29–30), at times to those who received miracles (Mk 1:44;

4. *Ibid.*, 15.

5. This term was coined by W. Wrede, *Il segreto messianico nei Vangeli* (Napoli: D’Auria, 1995); originally in German: *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien* (1901; 1969). This book also exists in English: *The Messianic Secret* (Lutterworth Press, 1987)

5:43; 7:36; 8:26), at other times to exorcised demons (Mk 1:25; 1:34; 3:12). In the end, Jesus openly declares his identity just as his passion begins and he is being forsaken by the crowd and by his disciples. He manifests himself openly as the Christ-Messiah, “Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’ Jesus said, ‘I am’” (Mk 14:61–62).

Mark offers what is, ultimately, a *paschal journey*: “The first part deals with a progressive recognition of who Jesus is. Then, once he is recognized, Jesus draws his disciples and followers to walk behind him, journeying along the road to the cross.”⁶ One may then ask how “this text was utilized in the community or communities that saw it come into existence.”⁷ At a literary level, the text contains all the hallmarks of a speech and a dramatic action that should be proclaimed all at once in the same breath. A suggested hypothesis is that Mark’s account was read at night during the vigil of Easter between Holy Saturday and Resurrection Sunday. For some listeners, those who were new members of the community, such a night was the culmination of their Christian initiation. At the conclusion of the entire Gospel reading, they would be baptized and

6. Benoît Standaert, *Il Vangelo secondo Marco* (Roma: Borla, 1984), 43.

7. Standaert, *Marco, Vangelo di una notte, vangelo per la vita*, 3:7.

called to participate for the first time in the Eucharistic banquet. As the structure of the Jewish Passover meal included a dramatic account, the *haggadah* (narrative reading), which was the thread throughout the ritual, so the early Christian Easter Vigil would have offered a similar account: the Gospel of Mark. Benoît Standaert maintains: “After the reading of the Gospel of Mark, the people would go to the river or the sea to baptize the catechumens. Then they would gather together for the Eucharistic banquet celebrated early in the morning.”⁸

Whatever the case, the second Gospel is not meant to be simply an informative collection of facts; the intent of the writer is without a doubt formative, in that he is seeking to persuade the listener to take a position on the person of Jesus, the Son of God, as well as to make a decision regarding their own life. One cannot escape from an encounter with this Gospel unscathed, and the person who reads it in faith is marked in a deep and lasting way. This will also be the manner in which we will approach the Book of Mark through these spiritual exercises. We will apply three questions to this Gospel, which correspond to the three classical stages of the spiritual path, aimed at conversion of the heart and the renewal of life.

8. *Ibid.*, 6.

1. Which steps should we take in order to free ourselves from evil and guide our lives firmly in accordance with the Father's plan?
2. What choices must we make in order to give full meaning to our lives as followers of Jesus?
3. What are we called to put into practice so that our lives are a source of light and love for others?

We will respond to these three questions in succession as related respectively to the purgative, illuminative, and unitive stages of the spiritual exercises. In light of the Gospel of Mark, we will consider how Jesus comports himself as his life unfolds, how he faces his death, and, finally, how he confronts the future of his mission for us.⁹

In conclusion, let us ask the Spirit for pure eyes in order to see the truth that enlightens and saves. Let us ask him for a pure heart that allows us to be transformed by that truth as we journey along the road of the Son of Man—Son of God, Jesus, and as we encounter him in Mark's narrative:

9. The original Italian, "*come si pone di fronte*," is difficult to translate thoroughly. While in a simple sense it means "to place himself before," at a deeper level it means, "to come face to face with, to confront, to relate to, to consider himself in regard to." This is a key phrase that the author uses throughout the book. — Trans.

Come, O Creator Spirit, visit our minds,
fill with your grace the hearts you created.
O sweet consoler, gift of the most high Father,
living water, fire, love, holy chrism of the soul.
Finger of the hand of God, promised by the Savior,
radiate your seven gifts, inspire in us the word.
Be light to the intellect, a burning flame in our heart;
heal our wounds with the balm of your love.
Protect us from the enemy, bring the gift of peace,
may your invincible guidance preserve us from evil.
Light of eternal wisdom, show us the great mystery
of God the Father and the Son united in one love.
Amen.



Jesus as He Faces His Life

How did Jesus regard himself in relation to his own life? What do his choices ask us to do if we intend to follow him, believe in him, and hope in him?

There are three particular scenes in Mark's account that help us answer these questions:

- a) the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan;
- b) the temptation in the desert;
- c) the description of a typical day of his ministry in Galilee, called the "day of Capernaum."

Baptism in the Jordan

Mark presents the baptism of Jesus thus:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mk 1:9–11)

The scene is introduced by the emphatic formula, typical in Mark, *kai euthys*, which means "and immediately" or "just as." The same expression is found right in the beginning of the account of the temptation of Jesus. It is as if the narrator wishes to emphasize the link between these two events, giving the impression that something decisive is about to take place in them. In the account of the baptism, we are presented with a manifestation of God, a theophany, similar to so many recounted in the Old Testament. Thus, we are told that Jesus has a unique relationship to God and that, through him, a new and decisive phase in the history of salvation is opening up.

The heavens are torn open and the Spirit descends on him. You can hear the invocation of Isaiah echoed, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down" (Isa 64:1). This is to be fulfilled finally in Jesus, who is both the presence and the voice of God among mankind, the one

through whom heaven descends on earth, and opens it to the ultimate horizon, the only one that fully gives meaning to life and to history. The Spirit who hovered over the waters at the first creation (see Gen 1:2) hovers over the waters of the new creation. The voice from heaven reveals the eternal identity of Jesus, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mk 1: 11). One recognizes the reference to Psalm 2:7, “He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you,’” and the sacrifice of Isaac, *the beloved*, in Genesis 22:2. Jesus, the Eternal Son, is the new Isaac offered by the Father for us.

This brings us to clearly understand what is in the consciousness of Jesus at the beginning of his public life. On the one hand, he knows that he is the Son of God, the Beloved. On the other hand, he is aware that he will be handed over in sacrifice for mankind. The joy of the love of the Father unites with the suffering that he will be called to undergo in order to carry out his mission. The Gospel, in short, shows us that anyone who wishes to follow Jesus can certainly count on the consolation of divine love that is offered to us all in him. However, we should also be ready to pay the price of love for our brethren and for their salvation, because the glory of God is fulfilled in this, which is also the good of humanity.

Let us ask ourselves then: Am I willing to trust in the love and faithfulness of God that is revealed in Jesus? Am I

willing to make decisions regarding my life with his example and help? Am I willing to pay the price of love by following him on his journey of the cross? Do I have faith in the fact that the Father never abandons his children in their trials? What resistance do I detect in myself? And what sins do I confess in order to allow myself to be forgiven and reconciled with the Father so as to be submissive to his will?

The temptation in the desert

Closely connected to the baptism of Jesus is the scene of his temptation:

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. (Mk 1:12–13)

Matthew and Luke speak of three temptations, modeled after those of Israel in the desert. Thus, they indicate that the obedience demanded of the Chosen People is fulfilled in Jesus (Mt 4:1–11; Lk 4:1–13). Mark, however, does not specify which temptation he is dealing with here. In this way, it seems that Mark is trying to tell us that temptation was present throughout the entire life of Jesus, and it pervaded his mission as beloved Son, come in the flesh, as indicated at the scene of his baptism (as we have said, the

close relationship between the two scenes is underlined by the repetition of the introductory expression, *kai euthys*, which means “and immediately” or “just as”). The reference to the period of forty days—a number in the Bible that indicates the time span of a generation, but also a privileged time before God—confirms this interpretation.

Moreover, while it is the Spirit who drives Jesus into the desert, it is Satan who comes to tempt him. Throughout Mark’s Gospel, this diabolical figure returns in an attempt to oppose God’s plan and thwart those who wish to carry it out, beginning with the Eternal Son come in the flesh. Thus, the temptation in the desert is situated in the context of the great battle between the Spirit of God and the Devil, in which the fate of all of us is placed. We can think of temptation as something radical that Adam experienced: trusting in one’s self and in the power of the world, instead of trusting in God and in one’s own weakness. Saint Augustine expressed this choice well, “Love of one’s self to the point of forgetting God, or love of God to the point of forgetting one’s self.”¹

Jesus perceives the seduction of the other side, which seemed to be more incisive. On the one hand, he feels the appeal of a political and worldly messianism, which was so

1. Saint Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XIV, 28.

widespread among his own people with whom he shared the pain of oppression. On the other hand, he is faced with the messianism of prophetic obedience, which he came to know through conversation with his Father, especially while reading of the Suffering Servant and the prophets in Scripture. He must choose between trusting in the judgment of God and the logic of the Prince of this world. The Nazarene said “no” to the propositions of his time and of all times: pleasure, possession, power. He does not seek popular approval, nor does he give in to the attraction of immediate results. Jesus chooses the Father. In an act of complete freedom, he prefers obedience to God and personal self-denial, to obedience to self and denial of the Father. He entrusts himself with unwavering certainty to the Father and he intends to fulfill God’s plan regardless of how dark and painful it may appear. During his temptation, Jesus demonstrates that he is free from himself, free for his Father and for others, free through the freedom of love. In Jesus, the unconditionally obedient Servant, the stairway of prophetic obedience reaches its highest point. Jesus testifies that if we rely on God during temptation, the Father will not abandon us. Instead, he will help open our eyes to the truth about ourselves and the world, which Satan wishes to obscure. Unconditional trust in God is the only true freedom from evil, and it is the only way to fulfill God’s plan in history!

Am I ready to do this without any excuses? Do I recognize that he alone is the Lord who heals us? And that his word has the power to make us whole?

The day of Capernaum

The fundamental option of loving his Father and other people thus inspired the choices Jesus made in regard to his life and his mission. How did he act upon them? Mark gives us a meaningful answer in his narration of a typical day of the Galilean prophet's ministry, and by describing the activities of Jesus through his process of alternating between events of revelation and invitations to discretion and silence. This has been called the messianic secret. The day of Capernaum is presented as follows:

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What

is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him, and he

was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter. (Mk 1:21–45)

First of all, we should note the geographical and social context of the scene. It takes place at the city gate, which was a place of commerce and trade, as well as a gathering place to resolve disputes. It also occurs in the synagogue, in the house of Simon, and finally in a deserted place. Jesus does not retreat from life's events; rather, he engages the world in its multiplicity of places and dealings. One could say that he is anything but a solitary hermit, someone who would flee from human relationships; on the contrary, he lives out his identity and mission everywhere and reaches people where they are and where they live their lives. The activities of Jesus are basically four.

The first is *teaching*. When Jesus taught, he aroused awe, for "he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (1:22). Jesus teaches authoritatively and he does not repeat what is already known, but he presents the newness of the kingdom of God that comes in the very person who proclaims it. It is, in fact, "a new

teaching” (1:27). Jesus is the first evangelizer, and he witnesses by his own way of acting that the proclamation of the truth that liberates and saves must be placed before everything.

The second activity of the Galilean prophet is *freedom* from evil. There is no trace of naiveté in the Nazarene; he does not close his eyes to this tragic aspect in human history. There is an ongoing struggle against the Evil One who wishes to separate people from God, from each other, and from themselves. This struggle must be confronted honestly by aiming directly at freedom from the evil and sin carried in people’s hearts. Jesus tells us that Satan is at work, and the danger he poses should never be underestimated. New life cannot begin without first being freed from the snares of the Prince of this world. This is the tragic reality of the redemptive work of the Son of God and of accepting his action in faith. It is essential to fight, resist, and overcome the Adversary with the strength that the Son of God came to bring to us. The temptation to hide this aspect from one’s self and underestimate the devastating power of sin, or to take shortcuts by seeking quick miracles, is always present in the human heart. It is difficult for everyone to accept hardship as a result of the decisions we must make and the things we must cease doing. But through his actions, Jesus unmasks every excuse and places before us the necessary choice.

The third activity that takes place in the day of the Nazarene is that of *healings*. These are a result of freedom from evil, and, in a certain sense, they represent a positive aspect of the work of the Messiah. The miracles that Jesus performs are a sign of the kingdom of God. At the same time, they presuppose and produce faith. Miracles presuppose faith because the power of God does not impose itself aggressively on people; rather, it enters in when one opens him or herself up through faith. Miracles produce faith because the powerful sign of the coming of salvation brings forth trust and the action of grace. Through his action, the Nazarene instructs us to continually measure ourselves against the impossible possibility of God. We are to reason not with evidence, but with the unknown and the incalculability that the mercy of God is capable of rousing for love of humanity. Jesus is aware that the miracles he accomplishes could be interpreted ambiguously; that is, his signs could attract people more to the benefits they hoped to obtain instead of to the challenging discipleship of love demanded by his word and life. This is why he does not allow the deceiving demons to talk (see Mk 1:34), and he retreats to solitude, going off early in the morning into the desert. Just so, he invites us to always first seek interior healing.

And it is there, in solitude, that Jesus lives the fourth fundamental activity of his day: *prayer*. The Italian text

says that Jesus “was praying” (Mk 1:35). The use of the imperfect verb tense indicates a sense of continuity.² Thus, prayer for Jesus is uninterrupted, which is more visible in some strong moments, yet always alive and profound. The substance of his prayer will be revealed only at the moment of Gethsemane—when he pours out everything in his relationship with his Father. Jesus puts his faith in his Father, he confides in him, he trusts him.³ He does this despite what is humanly incomprehensible and brutal. Thus, prayer marks the entire journey and mission of Jesus (see Mk 1:45; 6:46). One cannot live in obedience to the Father without a continual immersion in loving dialogue with him and without continuously entrusting oneself anew into the Father’s hands!

If in relation to God the Father, the Nazarene seeks to experience continuous prayer and moments of retreat in deserted places, in relation to people, he shuns all exploitation of the miraculous and he desires in every way to avoid

2. The Italian biblical source from which the author is quoting uses the word *pregava*, meaning “he was praying.” This is the imperfect Italian past tense which indicates, as the author says, an ongoing action in the past. The biblical text we quoted utilizes the simple past tense (preterite), “he prayed.” —Trans.

3. In the original Italian text, “Lui si affida, in Lui confida, di Lui si fida,” the author plays on three words with the same Latin root, *fides*, meaning “faith or trust.” —Trans.

any possible misunderstanding of his mission. Thus, he seeks to bring everything into the divine plan. And seeing this in relation to his life and work, we find the summons to discretion, the order to be silent (given, for example, to the man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue or to the healed leper), which has been called the messianic secret. It helps us to properly understand the effectiveness of our own prayer, which sometimes may not seem to be evidently or immediately valuable.

In the first place, the messianic secret is a literary device, with which the evangelist wishes to gradually lead the hearers of his Gospel to recognize and profess the messianic role of Jesus; that is, that he was the Son of God who came into this world to save us. In this sense, the catechumen is led by the hand down the pathway of initiation into the mystery of Christ. Nonetheless, it is not unfounded to conclude that the logic of his revelation-concealment is an intentional choice of the Nazarene himself. In this, Jesus is seeking not to enchant people with signs of power or amazing revelations, but rather to introduce them to an encounter of faith and love with him and with his heavenly Father, while completely respecting their freedom. Thus, Jesus prepares his followers to recognize him as the Son of God during his hour of abandonment and defeat on the cross, not in wonder and power. And this is how he instructs them to the faith he lived during the darkness of

Good Friday, as well as the blinding light of Easter. The Son of God (a title repeated seven times in Mark) is the Servant. In humiliation and death he reveals his eternal identity and his mission throughout time.

Finally, in the messianic secret, the faith of Jesus emerges inasmuch as he is a man. On the night of his earthly life, he advances toward the light of the final victory while trusting in the Father, whose loyalty he never doubts, even at the hour of his abandonment (see Mk 15:36; Lk 23:42). If the Master does so, how should the disciples behave? Will they not be called to go forth into the darkness of faith toward the light of the vision, supported only by faith in the promises of God and by the strengthening power of prayer?

Let us now ask ourselves how we pray? Do we abandon ourselves to God, to his will and his timing, or do we place deadlines and conditions? Do we immediately want the light or do we accept going forward in the dark, illuminated only by the word of God, like the *servus lampadarius*⁴ of our ancient forbears who illuminated each section of

4. In the ancient Roman world, the *servus lampadarius* (torch-bearing servant) was the servant whose job it was to precede his master with a torch to light the way in the night. The light did not illuminate the entire pathway, but only that portion along which they were traveling. — Trans.

the road just a little at a time, allowing only enough light to take the next step?

Therefore, in regard to his life and his mission, Jesus is presented by Mark as a man who lives his nature both as beloved Son of the heavenly Father and as Isaac, offered up in sacrifice by the same loving Father for us all. Glory and cross unite from the beginning of his awareness of his identity and mission. From his relationship of Son to the Father, Jesus draws light and strength in order to face his destiny on the cross in total freedom from self, out of love of God and humanity. His unconditional “yes” is put to the test by the hostility of the Adversary, but the Spirit does not abandon Jesus, and Jesus does not abandon the Father. The way of truth is tried and ends up victorious. The Galilean Prophet’s life is a gift of self and divine life to mankind marked by teaching, deliverance from evil, healings, and prayer rooted in the heart of the Father. In the ordinariness of life’s relationships, Jesus offers the news of salvation for our life that comes from above. He does so reservedly and with discretion in order to avoid any misunderstandings and to lead his disciples to accept the logic of the cross in which glory both reveals and gives itself.

To Jesus, as we see him in relation to his own life and mission, we turn in prayer as pilgrims in this night of faith. Let us, who are called to follow him in his choices, decide

for ourselves before the Father as Jesus decided, with the help that only he can give. Let us do so with the words of one of the great converts of the twentieth century, Giovanni Papini,⁵ while we question ourselves about our own life choices and the faithfulness with which we intend to follow the Lord:

We need you alone and no one else. You alone, who love us, can feel for all of us who suffer the compassion that each of us feels for himself. Only you can feel how immeasurably great is the need for you in this world, in this hour of the world. . . . Everyone needs you, even those who do not know it, and those who do not know it need you so much more than those who do know it. . . . Those who seek beauty in the world seek you without realizing it—you who are full and perfect beauty; those who seek truth in their thoughts, desire, without meaning to, you, who are the only truth worthy of being known, and those who struggle for peace seek you, the only peace where they can rest their most restless hearts. They call you without knowing that they are calling you, and their cry is inexpressibly more painful than ours. . . . But we, the last ones, wait for you. We will wait for you

5. Giovanni Papini (1881–1956) was a controversial journalist, poet, novelist, and critic of Christianity who converted to Catholicism in 1920 and authored the internationally acclaimed novel *Storia di Cristo*. — Ed.

every day, in spite of our unworthiness and every adversity. And all the love that we can press from our devastated hearts will be for you, the Crucified One, who was tortured out of love for us, and who now torments us with all the power of your relentless love.⁶

6. The concluding prayer in Giovanni Papini, *Storia di Cristo* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1922).