

Gazing on His Face

**A Christ-Centered
Spirituality**

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Preface

As a professor of systematic theology, I have taught courses in Christology at the graduate level for twenty-five years. Christology is that dimension of Christian theology that studies the person and the saving work of Jesus Christ. In Christology students explore the Old Testament background for faith in Jesus, the distinct portraits of Jesus given by the four Gospel writers, the thought of Paul on God's redemptive action in and through Christ, and the wealth of reflections on Christ given by the other authors of the New Testament. The study of Christology also entails consideration of the development of doctrine about Christ in the history of the church, the work of classical theologians like Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, the thought of spiritual masters like Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila, as well as the reflections on the person and work of Christ offered by contemporary theologians from a rich variety of contexts.

Two thinkers have enriched my understanding and appreciation of Jesus in a particular way. The first is the twentieth-century German theologian Karl Rahner (1904–84). Rahner has authored many essays and books on the academic study of Christ, especially his well-known work *Foundations of Christian Faith*.¹ Rahner's lengthy section on Christology in *Foundations* is a rigorous treatment of the church's doctrine about Christ as well as a compelling articulation of his own theological perspective on Christ. But what is particularly intriguing about Rahner's Christology is that

he includes a section on personal relationship with Jesus Christ as an integral part of his systematic Christology. Rahner admits that in the "average dogmatic theology" this topic is not usually covered.² But he thinks that it is essential to Christology, precisely because Christianity understands itself as a process of entering into and developing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Rahner proceeds to explore the meaning of this personal relationship. It is not something that is fully attained or realized at any single moment in one's life. It is a relationship that must be continually renewed through encountering Christ in the sacraments, prayerful study of the Christian Scriptures, and the effort to put into concrete practice in one's life the teaching of the gospel. It is always a process that calls for further growth. In this practice, Christians are invited to entrust their lives and their very selves to God through Jesus, who has made God personal and concrete in human history.

Rahner reminds us that the humanity of Jesus was not left behind in his resurrection. Rather, Jesus's humanity was raised up, and it "continues to exist forever as the reality of the eternal Logos [Word of God] himself."³ Thus, Christ's risen humanity continues to mediate to us the reality of God. This means that in building a loving relationship with the human Jesus, the Christian is embracing, and is embraced by, the living God.

Living the Christian life does not entail a "cookie cutter" discipleship. Rather, each Christian is invited into a unique relationship with Jesus that reflects the context of her or his life. Rahner asserts "that there can be and is a unique relationship between each individual and Jesus Christ, and that in the individual Christian there must be a quite personal and intimate love for Jesus Christ."⁴ Such a personal love for Christ is inseparably united with a genuine love of neighbor. Love of neighbor, in fact, is a prerequisite for love of Jesus. At the same time, our love of our fellow women and men grows through our love of Jesus, since "it is only in a loving relationship with Jesus that we conceive the possibilities of love

for neighbor that otherwise we should simply not hold to be feasible, but which present themselves nonetheless wherever we subsume our neighbor in our love for Jesus because he or she is Jesus' brother or sister."⁵ In other words, personal love of Jesus impels and inspires creative, concrete love of our neighbors.

Rahner portrays this call to a personal relationship with Jesus in a very down-to-earth way in an essay that he wrote. He recalls a conversation he had with a Protestant theologian in which he [Rahner] said, "Yes, you see, you're actually only really dealing with Jesus when you throw your arms around him and realize right down to the bottom of your being that this is something you can do today."⁶ Believers can still do this today because in his resurrection Jesus has attained a presence throughout the universe, and his risen humanity remains the abiding mediation of God. Thus, for Rahner an indispensable dimension of the life of the Christian is a unique, loving relationship with the person of Jesus, who is indescribably close to each one of us.

The second thinker who has influenced my reflection on the person and work of Jesus Christ is Pope Francis. He has consistently spoken of Jesus as the face of the Father's mercy. And he has exhorted every Christian to spend time gazing on the face of Jesus. In a section on the necessity of constant prayer that is found in his apostolic exhortation on the Call to Holiness in *Today's World*, Francis speaks of contemplation of the face of Jesus:

We need to remember that "contemplation of the face of Jesus, died and risen, restores our humanity, even when it has been broken by the troubles of life or marred by sin. We must not domesticate the power of the face of Christ." So let me ask you: Are there moments when you place yourself quietly in the Lord's presence, when you calmly spend time with him, when you bask in his gaze? Do you let his fire inflame your heart? Unless you let him warm you more and

more with his love and tenderness, you will not catch fire. (*Gaudete et Exsultate* 151)⁷

For Francis, then, contemplation of the face of Jesus restores our humanity, especially when our humanity has been wounded by our own failures or by the sufferings we have endured. The face of Christ has power—healing and renewing power. Thus, every believer is invited to spend time with the living Jesus, to sit quietly in his presence, to bask in his gaze. It is in and through such moments that we “catch fire” and are empowered to live as energetic disciples of Jesus, continuing his mission in the world. It is through such contemplation that we are impelled to engage in the praxis of the reign of God that Jesus proclaimed and made present.

A Christ-Centered Spirituality

This book is grounded in the tradition of Christology, but it is an effort to develop a Christ-centered *spirituality*. Spirituality is a discipline within theology, but more fundamentally the word speaks to an experience and a way of life. Theologian Joann Wolski Conn says that for Christians spirituality “means one’s entire life as understood, felt, imagined, and decided upon in relationship to God, in Christ Jesus, empowered by the Spirit.”⁸ Thus, a Christ-centered spirituality must speak to our entire life—our relationships with God, other people, creation, and self. It must address both the personal and the social dimensions of life. This spirituality must inform our understanding and our feelings, relating both to the intellectual and affective aspects of being human. And it must inspire our imagination—the possibilities that we envision, as well as our decisions—the concrete choices we make that give direction to our lives.

Though Jesus Christ stands at the very center of all Christian belief and thought, the approach to Christian spirituality

that I adopt in this book is only one possible way of articulating a Christian spirituality. Other ways of proceeding give rise to a Trinitarian focus on spirituality, a Spirit-centered (pneumatological) spirituality, a liberationist spirituality, a feminist spirituality, an ecological spirituality, among many others. Each of these approaches seeks to integrate the person and work of Jesus Christ into its elaboration of what it means to live the Christian life.

The person and the work of Jesus Christ are one of the central mysteries of the Christian faith. This mystery reflects our experience of the self-communication of God in human history in the most personal of ways. It is ultimately about God’s gracious presence and action in history. Though we can grow in our understanding of this mystery through prayerful reflection and study, we will never “wrap our minds” around this mystery, which is an object of faith. Therefore, no book on Christian spirituality can fully explore and articulate the mystery of Jesus Christ. In many ways, we can only scratch the surface.

In this book, I approach the mystery of Christ’s person and saving work by reflecting on a number of titles for Christ that have been ascribed to him in the Christian tradition. These include the following: friend, healing presence of God, caller of disciples, Bread of Life, Good Shepherd, Priest, Brother, Prince of Peace, and Good Samaritan. Each title can serve as a window through which we can contemplate the mystery of the one whom Christians confess to be Lord and Savior. Reflection on the meaning of these christological titles can enrich our understanding of a Christ-centered spirituality for today.

Gazing on Beauty

I invite the reader to do what Pope Francis suggests in his exhortation on the call to holiness: to contemplate the face of Jesus. Francis tells us that there is power in the face of Christ.

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That is certainly true. But one also finds beauty in that face—exquisite beauty. Theologian Gerald O'Collins, who has authored numerous books on Christology, reflects on the beauty of Christ in his book *Jesus: A Portrait*.⁹ He cites a famous homily of Saint Augustine (354–430) on Psalm 45. This Hebrew psalm originally celebrated a royal marriage in Israel. But Christian thinkers from the time of the early church have interpreted it to refer to the relationship between Christ the Bridegroom and his church, the Bride. Envisioning Christ to be the fulfillment of the Psalmist's description of the king, Augustine lauds his beauty:

He was beautiful in heaven, then, and beautiful on earth: beautiful in the womb and beautiful in his parents' arms. He was beautiful in his miracles but just as beautiful under the scourges, beautiful as he invited us to life, but beautiful too in not shrinking from death, beautiful in laying down his life and beautiful in taking it up again, beautiful on the cross, beautiful in the tomb, and beautiful in heaven.¹⁰

O'Collins observes that when Augustine claims that Christ was "just as beautiful under the scourge," we are compelled to acknowledge "how the crucified Jesus in a radically subversive way challenges all the normal indices of beauty."¹¹ Even in the most repulsive moments of his passion, as Jesus is being tortured to death, believers can contemplate the supreme beauty of infinite, self-giving love. And they are "summoned to recognize beauty in the weak and suffering men and women with whom Christ identifies himself."¹² It is the faithful, steadfast love radiated in the face of Christ that has attracted countless men and women through the centuries, beginning with his public ministry and the call of his first disciples.

O'Collins refers to a famous painting by the Italian artist Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Calling of Matthew*, which is kept

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in the Church of Saint Louis in Rome. It depicts Jesus pointing at Matthew, as Matthew is busily at work at his tax collector's post. In response, Matthew points at himself as if to say, "Do you really mean me?" Caravaggio's blend of light and shadows in this painting is remarkable. O'Collins reflects on this masterpiece in these words: "The look on the face of the beautiful Christ calls Matthew to new life. In turn, the light on the face of Matthew shows that he has recognized the beautiful Light of God who has come into the world (John 1:9; 9:5). The divine face and the human face meet in a moment of creation and recreation."¹³

It is my hope that in reading and praying with the chapters of this book, readers will be drawn to contemplate the beautiful face of Christ and, in so doing, will experience a call to new life. By reflecting on the mystery of Christ through the "windows" of traditional christological titles, our own faces and the face of Christ can meet in a moment of creation and recreation.

Chapter 1

Christ the Friend

Building Friendship with Christ

In the introduction to this book, I took note of Pope Francis's observation that contemplation of the face of Jesus restores our humanity. The first aspect of the mystery of Jesus Christ that I will explore resonates with a deeply human experience—the gift of friendship. Friendship is one of the greatest treasures in our lives. We work hard to build strong friendships and to nurture those relationships through the years. We celebrate those friendships in a rich variety of ways, and we grieve deeply when we lose a friend. As we grow older and look back on our lives, we recognize that having good friends is more important than most of the other treasures we have accumulated or achievements we have realized.

In a well-known passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus invites his disciples to live in friendship with him:

As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told

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you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father. (John 15:9–15)

This passage is part of the lengthy farewell discourse in the Gospel of John. This discourse is set within the context of Jesus's final meal with his disciples before the "hour" of his passion. At that meal, he assumes the role of a servant and washes the feet of his disciples. Then he offers his "last will and testament," in which he instructs his disciples about their relationship with him and their mission in the world.

Through a rich mosaic of images, the Gospel of John depicts Jesus as the source of life and fruitfulness for all people. Those images are very familiar to us. They include Living Water, Bread of Life, Light of the World, Good Shepherd, and more. This passage from the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of John follows Jesus's words that employ another familiar image, that of the vine: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower" (John 15:1). The image of the vine/vineyard is evoked in the Old Testament to depict the relationship of the people of Israel to God, with whom they had entered into a covenant bond (see Isa 5:1–7; Ps 80:9–17). In the Gospel, it is a symbol that expresses the closeness of communion with Jesus. A vine and its branches are intertwined. Just so, Jesus is the source of life for those who "remain" in him. The word *remain* (*menein* in Greek) reflects an important theme in the Gospel of John. Disciples must "remain" or "abide" in Jesus. This section of the Gospel speaks about *connection*—about the call to every disciple to strengthen her or

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his connection with Jesus. Without this vital connection, our discipleship loses its nourishment and its very life. Today we live in a world where people are almost desperate to establish connections. Witness the voluminous use of social networks. Young and old go to the greatest lengths to stay connected with one another. Long before these Internet innovations, the Gospel of John was instructing readers about the importance of believers strengthening their connections with Christ and with one another.

It is in the context of Jesus's discourse about the vine and the branches that we are introduced to the theme of friendship. Jesus seems to surprise his disciples by calling them "friends." You can almost picture the disciples as taken aback at these words of Jesus. They are no longer to think of themselves as slaves, servants, apprentices, or merely students, but as the friends of Jesus. He calls them friends because he has communicated to them all that he has heard from his Father. Just as Jesus shares life with his Father, so he invites his disciples to a sharing of life that is friendship. This is a crucial moment in the narrative of the Gospel, and it is a very significant invitation to disciples of every time and place.

In the narrative of the Gospel of John, this scene is set within the context of the "hour" of Jesus—that critical time in the journey of Jesus that is looming. It is the hour of Jesus's passion—of his betrayal and death, but also of his glorification. At the beginning of the farewell discourse, Jesus had told his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled" (John 14:1). But this must have been a very troubling time for all of them. We can imagine ourselves sitting at table with Jesus at this moment. The atmosphere must have been charged with uncertainty and intense anxiety, as Jesus's disciples wondered what would happen to him and what would happen to them, his followers. It must have been clear that the net was closing in upon them. At such times, what is most important in life becomes clarified; everything becomes limpidly clear. It is in that tense atmosphere that Jesus defines the character of his friendship-love by proclaiming what he will

soon do: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). It is the love of God incarnated in Jesus that comes first in the Gospel. Grace always precedes our response, and grace makes our response to God's love possible. It is the love of God poured out in Jesus that elicits the response of his disciples, and here it is shown to be a love to the very end—a love that goes to the greatest lengths. The offer of friendship by Jesus is a gift; it is not something earned or deserved, but is a gift meant to evoke a response in us. It all begins with a gift.

So often in our lives we see the truth of the Scriptures illumined in the lives of people whom we encounter. When I was a freshman in college in Richmond, Virginia, I engaged in some volunteer service in a poor, rooming house part of the city. It was there that I met a man named George. At the time George was in his fifties and lived by himself in the drab front room of a run-down house. George was legally blind and suffered from severe epilepsy. The physicians at the public clinic that he visited had difficulty finding the right blend of medications to control his seizures. His epilepsy had been aggravated years before when, while he was selling newspapers on a downtown street corner, someone hit him over the head with a metal pipe and stole the fifteen dollars he had in his pocket. George also had some cognitive deficits, though he had greater intellectual acumen than most people realized. He barely survived on public assistance, struggling at the end of every month to make it until his check arrived in the mail.

I soon realized that George was a friend of Christ; he was one of Christ's closest friends. When I would knock on the door of his room, I would often find him sitting on his bed reading from a large braille volume of the New Testament. Each Sunday, George would put on his cleanest pair of pants and best suitcoat and take the bus downtown to Centenary Methodist Church, where he worshiped. He once told me, with a deep sense of pride and satisfaction, that years before he had been able to contribute

fifty dollars to the church fund to help finance a light that hung over the pulpit where the Word of God was proclaimed. George had a rather cryptic way of speaking; when he spoke of Jesus, he referred to him simply as "The Savior." Sometimes he would tell me about the in-depth conversations he had with The Savior.

I was nineteen years old at the time, trying to figure out my place in life and discern my vocation. Raised in a more privileged part of the city, I had never had a friend like George. And we remained friends through the years even after I left Richmond and was ordained a Passionist priest, until George finally died in a nursing home. Though I did not have the vocabulary to express it at the time, George showed me something about what it means to "remain" in Christ. And he taught me—the college student—about the invitation to live as a friend of Christ.

Friendship in the Christian Tradition

The theme of friendship has been explored and developed by towering Christian thinkers. In the thirteenth century, Saint Thomas Aquinas, building on the philosophy of Aristotle, described the theological virtue of charity as friendship with God, citing John 15 in his explanation.¹ Saint Teresa of Avila, writing in the sixteenth century, was also deeply influenced by the gospel teaching about friendship with Christ. At twenty years old, Teresa entered the Carmelite monastery, where she endured serious illnesses that almost took her life on more than one occasion. After she recovered, she lived a religious life that she felt was neither satisfying nor particularly fervent. But when she was thirty-nine years old, she had a powerful experience of God while praying before a statue of the scourged Christ. From that time on, she resolved to live a life of deeper friendship with Christ.

In her autobiography, her *Life*, Teresa offers what may be the best description of prayer ever given. Pope Francis cited her definition in his 2018 apostolic exhortation *On the Call to Holiness (Gaudete et Exsultate 149)*. In this passage she is describing mental prayer, but her definition applies, I believe, to personal prayer in general. Teresa writes, "For mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us."² Teresa sets the meaning of prayer within the context of friendship with God. On the one hand, her description is simple and straightforward, but on the other hand, there is a depth to it that invites ongoing reflection. It certainly echoes the words of Jesus in the farewell discourse of the Gospel of John. Pope Francis says about Teresa's description of prayer, "I would insist that this is true not only for the privileged few but for all of us" (*Gaudete et Exsultate 149*).

Further along in her autobiography, Teresa speaks of her experience of gazing on the sacred humanity of Jesus. Some of the spiritual experts of her day taught that, once a person reaches an advanced stage on the path to union with God, he or she must leave behind consideration of all created things, even the humanity of Jesus. From her own experience of prayer, Teresa contested this teaching, counseling her readers to spend time engaging the human Jesus in reflection and prayer. This is the Jesus whom Teresa addresses as "friend." She writes, "Whoever lives in the presence of so good a friend and excellent a leader, who went ahead of us to be the first to suffer, can endure all things. The Lord helps us, strengthens us, and never fails: He is true friend."³ For Teresa, Christ is always a true friend at our side. This abiding sense of Christ's friendship was an enduring dimension of Teresa's spiritual journey.

A number of contemporary theologians writing from the perspective of women have pointed out that the Gospel accounts of the ministry of Jesus show that he modeled a way of relating that was characterized by friendship and mutuality rather than

domination. This was evident in his own relationships with women and in the table fellowship he offered to people of many different backgrounds, including those who existed on the margins of the community. Reflecting on Jesus's liberating ministry, Elizabeth Johnson remarks, "New possibilities of relationships patterned according to the mutual services of friendship rather than domination-subordination flower among women and men who respond and join his circle."⁴

Characteristics of Friendship

Through the centuries theologians and spiritual writers have taught that reflecting on the characteristics of human friendship can help us to come to a better understanding of the dynamics of our relationship with Christ. Their writings invite us to consider the important friendships in our lives and to identify the "ingredients" in the recipe for a lasting friendship. Paul Wadell, a Catholic ethicist who has authored several works on friendship and the moral life, points out that classical authors set forth three distinguishing characteristics of friendship-love: benevolence, mutuality, and the capacity to look upon a friend as another self.⁵ It is helpful, I believe, to explore these three characteristics and relate them to the invitation to friendship extended to each of us by the risen Christ.

First, *benevolence*. Benevolence means seeking the good of one's friend, of the beloved. A real friend wants what is truly best for us. And he or she desires that good not in some sort of detached, theoretical way, but in a very concrete, down-to-earth manner. A true friend is devoted to the well-being of the other. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas describes God's love for people as benevolence. God is always devoted to the well-being of God's beloved daughters and sons. God's love is totally other-centered; it is never for God's own "gain" in any way.

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Second, *mutuality*. Sometimes we desire the good of another but do not experience that same desire in return. That can be a frustrating, even painful, experience. For genuine friendship to develop, there must be mutuality—reciprocity. Wadell says, “Friendship is mutual or reciprocal love in which each person knows that the good they offer another is also the good the other wishes for them. This second characteristic of friendship attests that friends are those that recognize each other’s love and share it, the exchange of which is the soul of the relationship.”⁶ Real friendship is grounded in mutual concern, mutual gift.

This is precisely what we believe about the life of the Trinity, about what God is really like. Christians are convinced that God in Godself is a personal communion of life and love, an eternal dynamism of mutual giving and receiving. If we have been created in the image and likeness of God, we have been created in the image and likeness of the Trinity. That means we are “hard-wired” for relationship. We are made for friendship.

Third, *seeing the friend as another self*. Classical thinkers tell us that this mutual sharing of love in friendship eventually leads each friend to see the other as “another self.” This does not mean that we attempt to recreate our friends in our own image and likeness. It does not suggest that we see the friend as just an extension of ourselves, a kind of spiritual “clone.” A true friend accepts the other for who he or she is. This characteristic means, rather, that through the love that binds friends together they become like one another in goodness and character.⁷ There is a shared vision of life, especially of what is most important in life.

Benevolence, mutuality, the capacity to see the friend as another self: we can apply these three “friendship ingredients” to our relationship with Christ. First, benevolence, the strategy of devotion to the good of the other. This characteristic of friendship suggests that we need to learn to trust that Christ truly desires what is best for us. His strategy is devotion to our well-being. Sometimes it is difficult to recognize or feel that, especially in times of

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disappointment and suffering. In such periods, it can seem that Christ is far away from us, unresponsive to our pleadings. It is good to remember that Christ himself experienced this feeling of distance from his Father in his passion. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark describe him as praying the opening line of Psalm 22 from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). Nevertheless, he continued to hold onto the hand of God even at his darkest hour. And his resurrection from the dead showed that he was not, in reality, abandoned by the Father. We, then, are invited to renew our trust that the Lord Jesus is always present and on the move, seeking what is good for us, offering us life. Often that involves his capacity to bring life out of the “deathly” experiences of our lives. We need to become ever more convinced that Christ is not the detached, inaccessible Lord watching from afar to see how we will “score” on the tests of life. Rather, Christ is intimately involved in our lives and actively seeking our well-being.

How do we seek the well-being of Christ? How can we exercise benevolence toward Christ? It almost sounds odd to express it that way. But we can, in fact, exercise benevolence toward Christ by reflecting his presence and his love to others. By building up the Body of Christ. By attending to Christ in the people we encounter, especially those in need, as Pope Francis has reminded us again and again. There is a compelling expression of this idea in the writings of Gregory of Nazianzus, an important bishop and theologian of the fourth century. Gregory writes, “Let us visit Christ wherever we may; let us care for him, feed him, clothe him, welcome him, honor him....The Lord of all asks for mercy, not sacrifice, and mercy is greater than myriads of fattened lambs. Let us then show him mercy in the persons of the poor and those who today are laying on the ground, so that when we come to leave this world they may receive us into everlasting dwelling places.”⁸ Pope Francis echoes Gregory’s sentiments in his exhortation on the call to holiness when he says that the best way to discern if our prayer is

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authentic is to judge to what extent our life is being transformed in the light of mercy (*Gaudete et Exsultate* 105).

What does mutuality in our relationship with Christ entail? It is important to realize that, when all is said and done, our life with God does not consist simply of completing a set of spiritual exercises, as if it were a spiritual "Olympic training." Spiritual exercises are essential, and we do need to cultivate self-discipline if our life with God is to flourish. But at its core, the life of the Spirit is an adventure of entrusting our lives and our very selves ever more fully to Christ and becoming ever more receptive to his gift of self to us. The heart of our life with God is personal self-gift, self-donation in response to God's self-communication in and through Christ. Fostering this mutuality requires us to accept Christ's love for us. Sometimes that is where we struggle the most; we draw back from the presence of Christ in anxiety or fear. We prefer to keep Christ at arm's length. We are acutely aware of our own weakness and sinfulness, and so we wonder why Christ would want to draw near to us. We may also be afraid of what Christ might ask of us. So it can be tempting to try to keep Christ at a safe distance. But if our friendship with Christ is to grow stronger, we must invite him to draw close to us and allow ourselves to receive from him. There is meant to be a true reciprocity in our friendship with Christ.

The capacity to see the friend as another self is reminiscent of a compelling, truly stunning, passage from Paul's Letter to the Galatians. The Apostle seems to lose himself as he reflects on the grace of God poured out in Christ: "I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me" (Gal 2:19–20). Paul articulates his conviction that we discover our true selves in Christ. We become our best selves by staying connected to Christ, as the Gospel of John reminds us. Karl Rahner expressed this truth in a compelling way in his writings on theology and spirituality. In

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our ordinary experience, it is often the case that the more dependent we become on others, the less free, the less autonomous, we become. We speak of "codependence" to describe unhealthy relationships in which neither person is really free or able to mature as a person. But in our relationship with Christ *precisely the opposite* is the case. The more we come to depend on Christ—to root our entire lives in him—the freer, the more autonomous, the more "human" we become. This is true because we come to love the things that Christ loves. We learn to see life and other people more the way that Christ sees them. Through his grace, we become more like Christ in goodness and character.

Conclusion

So we begin by listening closely to the words of Jesus found in the Gospel of John: "I have called you friends." We are invited to allow those words to resound in our minds and hearts. We are summoned to recognize Christ as the one whose stance toward us is one of benevolence, the one who passionately desires to form a relationship of mutual love with us, and the one in and through whom we become our best selves.

FOR REFLECTION

- What do the traditional characteristics of friendship say to you about your relationship with Christ?
- Every friendship has its significant moments. What have been the significant moments in your friendship with Christ through the years?