



STUDIES
IN
THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS

**"To always be thinking somehow
about Jesus"**

The Prologue of Ludolph's Vita Christi

MILTON WALSH

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Business Office

Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits
3601 Lindell Blvd.,
St. Louis, MO 63108
Tel. 314-633-4622; Fax 314-633-4623
E-mail ijesuitsources.com

Editorial Office

Faber House
102 College Road
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467-3841
Tel. 617-552-0860; Fax 617-552-0925
E-mail fleminpb@bc.edu

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the first word . . .

The Loyola Marymount bookstore can scarcely be called a bookstore. Few university shops can. They are merely spaces where outside concessioners operate a textbook service for students and an overpriced souvenir boutique for loyal alumni/ae. The identical inventory that jams the shelves of all these places is probably imported from the same mega-factory somewhere in Bangladesh, Indonesia, or Guatemala. From campus to campus throughout the land, the sweatshirts, coffee mugs, and Teddy bears show a distinct family resemblance. And so do the price tags. Only the logos offer the illusion of individuality. A discerning shopper can differentiate the merchandise only by embossed Eagles in Boston, Rams in New York, Dolphins in Syracuse, and Lions in Los Angeles. In Washington, a bulldog with a old-fashioned baseball cap grins from every T-shirt in the room, but that's only because no one quite knows what a Hoya looks like. In St. Louis everyone knows what a Billiken looks like, but few can explain what it is. Let's not single out Jesuit universities. A few years ago I had occasion to visit the Notre Dame bookstore after a zealous airport official and I had a slight disagreement about how much toothpaste I could bring onto the plane. The place was a huge department store of sis-boom-bah paraphernalia. Overwhelming. After some searching amongst the shamrocks, I found my toothpaste, but needed a shower to wash off all the Irish rah rah.

But back to Los Angeles. My six-hour flight in steerage from Boston provided the time—if not the space—to reread several manuscripts and scratch my usual illegible editorial markings in the margins. As the Seminar wrapped up its meeting with decisions about the next couple of issues of *STUDIES*, I realized that it would be a long trip back to Boston with nothing to read. With somewhat limited expectations, I marched off to the LMU bookstore. It had moved. Not a good start that. The new site provided considerably more space for the Lion appliquéd baby booties and note pads than the old store, but not much more for books. After a modest search I was able to find the “current selections” area hidden in the back of the shop between plastic laundry baskets and Taiwanese reading lamps. As I could have predicted, the pickings were slim. The one side of the one bookcase offered some indication of the bookstore's idea of what college students are reading. That someone thinks they are reading anything in the age of *Jersey Shore*, smart phones, and laptops should be encouraging, but the meager selection of titles soon dashes that brief glimmer of optimism. (Oswald Spengler, where are you now that we need you?)

Among the comic volumes authored by Chelsea Handler, the television personality, a few fitness and diet books, and cartoon anthologies, covered

a monument of the past: J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. It sneaked up on me. Hiding in its new slick cover, so different from the red and gold Bantam Book edition that probably cost less than a dollar when it first came out, it seemed to be struggling to mask its age, like Grandma with a facelift and Gucci wraparound sunglasses. I was dismayed. This book formed a major part of my youth and no graphic designer could take it away from me. I read a page, or two at most, then with an odd mixture of affection and regret, placed it back on the shelf. I eventually settled on Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*. Fortunately, a flight with many empty seats (that allowed me to stretch out) and three successive nights of interrupted sleep suggested that I delay my reading of this cheery tome in favor of a lengthy and well-deserved nap.

Choosing a melancholy history over a favorite novel seems an odd choice, doesn't it? And perhaps my reasons for making the decision will seem even odder. It wasn't a quest for novelty. The fact is that I scarcely remember anything about Holden's odyssey. No, *The Catcher in the Rye* stands as one of those monumental books in my youth, and I didn't want to spoil it by going back to it and risk being disappointed. I wanted the memory, and I was willing to sacrifice the reality in order to preserve it. And the memory has many facets to it. Although it was first published in 1951, it was certainly still current during my high-school years in the mid-1950s. It will come as no surprise to those who know me that I fell in with the tweedy set in school. Our uniform consisted of argyle socks, white bucks, flannel slacks, rep-stripe ties, button-down collars, and, of course, Harris tweed jackets. Everybody smoked cigarettes in senior year, and one of our number even sported a pipe to underline his tweediness. It was *Esquire*, I believe, that published an article explaining the superiority of the Ivy League, and in 1955 Msgr. John Tracy Ellis wrote a famous essay in *Thought*, "American Catholics and the Intellectual Tradition," pointing out the limitations of Catholic education during that period. Denied the Cambridge crimson in fact, we tried to create our own ivy-festooned enclave right there in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. The most adventurous of our set actually dared to express his intention to go to the real Harvard, even though the registrar would not send out transcripts to non-Catholic colleges. And besides, we all knew that these godless institutions constituted a proximate threat to the faith. (He went to Fordham for a year and then transferred to Harvard. We lost touch. I don't know if he turned out to be a gangster or a Knight of Malta.)

Most of all, ours was the literary set. We edited all the publications in the school, and wrote stories for the prize-winning *Brooklyn Prep Magazine*. Daniel Berrigan, a newly published poet fresh from his transformative tertianship experience at Paray-le-Monial, where he first encountered the worker-priest movement, doled out copies of Bernanos's *The Diary of a Country Priest* and Mauriac's *Woman of the Pharisees*, daring us to understand them. We trekked over to Manhattan as a group to see Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and pretended that we knew what it was all about. We talked about books featured in *The New York Times Book Review* the previous Sunday, without much likelihood we

would ever read them. Over and over we went back to the two staples that most of us had read: Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and, of course, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Daring stuff. It was all so very pretentious but, without a doubt, it was great fun and a great start to an education. Posturing, trying on different personalities like sweaters in a thrift shop is what adolescence is all about. Who would want to spoil all those memories by going back to a book that could not possibly live up to its enshrined place in one's personal bibliography?

Another reading experience some years later provides ample justification for my reluctance to go back to *The Catcher*. During the juniorate, the rhetoric professor assigned a different book to each of his young scholars. He gave me *The Education of Henry Adams*. I had never heard of the man or the book, but dutiful scholastic that I was, I plunged into it. It must have hit just the right note of post-adolescent *angst*, because it was one of the most extraordinary reading experiences of my life. Going above and beyond the call of duty, I also devoured Adams's *Mont St. Michel and Chartres* before handing in my review essay. Years passed, and for some strange reason, *The Education* came back to haunt me. I dug up a copy in the public library, and after a few pages, declared it simply narcissistic and unreadable. At least it was for me, at that time in my life. No doubt it remains a monument of autobiographical literature. The book had not changed; I had. Some day I may return to it, more to discover how the years have changed me, rather than the book. For some odd but undeniable reason, people tend to age more precipitously than great books.

Of course, the opposite can also happen. Some second readings bring greater rewards than the first time around. At the beach one summer a few years ago, I was looking for a good, substantial read, just in case the weather gods decided to interfere with vacation plans. Somehow *Moby Dick* hove into the living room, all sails to the wind. My high-school reading left me with the recollection of a great adventure story, a kind of *Treasure Island* without pirates. Surely that would help pass a drizzly day on the Jersey Shore. As the chapters slipped past under my fingers, however, I found myself captivated. Near the end, I can remember sitting on the jetty, staring at the moiling gray surf and pondering my own insignificant role in a brute, uncaring universe. It was a spectacular intellectual adventure, but scarcely the kind of villa reading I initially had in mind. It was, in fact, a different kind of vacation, and one of the most enjoyable ever. The adult conversation with Melville was exhilarating; that precocious teenager of many voyages ago didn't have a clue. His sole concern was will Ahab catch the whale or not?

Some books enter a person's life at a magic moment and change it forever. Try to imagine what the swashbuckling Captain Íñigo Oñaz López de Loyola would have made of the *Vita Christi* of Ludolph the Carthusian while he was still polishing his armor and his dance steps. Could we ever imagine his even looking at it? Why would he? Let's run the calendar forward a few decades. Father Ignatius has settled into bustling, renaissance Rome as he tried to organize a new, thoroughly modern religious order as Superior General. Having

to deal with kings, popes, and Bobadilla on a daily basis, would he ever have had the patience or leisure to turn from his complicated administrative tasks to wade into Ludolph's medieval prose? As far as we know he never went back to it. The book came into his world at precisely the right moment, and not only changed his life but ours as well.

The afterglow of Ludolph surely lasted through the time at Manresa, when the ex-soldier wrestled with his future, now that his life had been redirected by a severe leg wound. As he put together the jottings that would eventually become the *Spiritual Exercises*, the phrases and ideas of Ludolph came back to him and took on new life on the pages of his notebooks. A Jesuit will read this translation, so meticulously prepared by Fr. Milton Walsh, with an eerie sense of recognition. It's like looking at an old family album. We are amused by the quaint clothing and hair styles, yet delighted to identify a family resemblance among those long-dead relatives: Dad's nose, Aunt Mary's eyes, all in tintype. Reading Ludolph has given me a new appreciation of Ignatius. He was a master editor. He took a rambling medieval document, filled with repetitions and wholesale borrowings, and compressed it into the concise manual for spiritual direction that continues to speak to us in the twenty-first century. If we can think of Ignatius as Father Ignatius, Ludolph might deserve some consideration as our Grandfather.

In his masterly introduction to the text, Father Walsh has eased a long festering problem I've always had with the *Exercises*. Many of those contemplations of the Second, Third, and Fourth Weeks seemed to have only a flimsy relationship with the Gospels. Many times I've heard older Jesuits express regrets about the training in scripture they received in the old theologates, before their own professors had the opportunity to adjust to *Divino afflante Spiritu* (1943) and its acceptance of form criticism. I've no such complaint. By the 1960s the Woodstock Scripture faculty, with the formidable Joseph Fitzmyer and two excellent younger scholars who subsequently pursued other interests, provided a splendid introduction to the then "modern" critical methods. It was a superb education, but it came at a cost. In the years that followed, I've always cringed to hear preachers and retreat directors go off on fanciful tangents that elaborated on what was going on in the minds of Jesus, the disciples, or witnesses to the miracles. How could anyone presume to put thoughts into the heads of these remote figures of the text? Even worse, my own preaching has not been untouched by a few pious glosses from time to time. Is it schizophrenia or hypocrisy? These embellishments make the passage more interesting, to be sure, but can they be justified scientifically?

That may be the wrong question, or at least a question based on the wrong assumptions. A scientific reading of the texts is essential, but it is not exclusive. In leading his readers through Ignatius's reading of Ludolph and the place of Scripture in formulating the *Exercises*, Father Walsh has provided a more expansive appreciation of the initial formulation of the canonical texts and their incorporation into medieval texts like the *Vita Christi*. I won't risk distortion by trying to summarize Father Walsh's argument. The pages that fol-

low make their own case. On behalf of our readers, however, let me express gratitude to Father Walsh for making this invaluable historical source available to STUDIES and for having the patience to prepare us for knowledgeable reading of the text. In the years to come, this issue will certainly become a standard background reading for any course of the history of the *Spiritual Exercises*. And it will provide a refreshing new dimension for our own ventures in making or directing them. Someday it may even be found among the “course packs” shelved with the theology textbooks at the Loyola Marymount bookstore.

Richard A. Blake, S.J.

Editor

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*The Rev. Milton Walsh, a priest of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, received his doctorate in fundamental theology from the Gregorian University. In addition to his parochial assignments, he taught theology at St. Patrick's Seminary in Menlo Park, California, for several years. He is the author of *Ronald Knox as Apologist and Second Friends: C. S. Lewis and Ronald Knox in Conversation*, both published by Ignatius Press. Father Walsh has long had an interest in both Ignatian and Carthusian spirituality, and the Prologue is part of a long-term project of translating those sections of the *Vita Christi* that correspond to the *Mysteries of the Life of Christ* given at the end of the *Spiritual Exercises*.*

“To always be thinking somehow about Jesus”

The Prologue of Ludolph’s Vita Christi

During his prolonged convalescence Ignatius read the Life of Christ by Ludolph of Saxony, an experience that had a profound influence on his Spiritual Exercises. The earlier work blended both monastic and mendicant traditions and proposed imaginative reconstructions of events in the Gospels as a means of drawing closer to Jesus. In fashioning a spirituality for an apostolic order, Ignatius returned to the earlier sources for inspiration.

I. Introduction

The convalescing soldier asks for some chivalrous romances to pass the time; none are at hand, but he is given a couple of pious books. In Francis Thompson’s words, “Little such provender liked him; but sick men and prisoners read anything, and much faithful introspection has come of being shut up with one compulsory book. So it was with young Iñigo.”¹ One of those two books was the *Vita Christi* written by a Carthusian monk, Ludolph of Saxony (d. 1377). This work had a profound effect on Ignatius, and greatly influenced his *Spiritual Exercises*, especially its approach to the life of Christ. Here is presented

¹Francis Thompson, *Saint Ignatius Loyola* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1950), 24.

for the first time an English translation of the Prologue to Ludolph's *Vita*. It is of interest to students of Ignatian spirituality because it lays down the principles that guided the Carthusian in his work, which in turn helped to shape the *Spiritual Exercises*. And, as an excerpt from one of the most influential spiritual writings of the late Middle Ages, it may be of some interest to historians as well.

Can this medieval work also offer a fruitful approach to the Gospels for men and women at the beginning of the twenty-first century? The initial answer might be no: for many, the acceptance of the historical-critical approach to Scripture seems to have broken the spell of the older, "pre-critical" devotional approaches to the life of Christ; the *Vita Christi* is as romantic—and remote—as that castle in Spain where our sixteenth-century knight recuperated. However, some reflection suggests that older sources like this have relevance for us today. In a paper presented in Louvain several years ago, Anthony Godzieba challenged the assumption that the break between "pre-critical" and "post-critical" approaches to the Gospel was absolute. He examined two medieval texts, the *Vita Christi* and the *Golden Legend* (interestingly, the very books Ignatius read in his convalescence), and the studies of the historical Jesus made by Herman Reimarus, Robert Funk, and John Meier.² While noting the very significant differences, Godzieba also found an underlying continuity: in all of these projects the historical life of Jesus provides a criterion for the critique and reform of Christian experience. For Reimarus and Funk, the experience to be critiqued is that of institutional Christianity; Meier's purpose is to present a historically verifiable Jesus as a foundation for Christology, and to provide the present-day reader with reliable information about him.

Whatever benefits such a dialogue between past and present might bring to biblical scholarship, some familiarity with Ludolph's writings can enrich our spiritual reading of the Gospels. Godzieba summed up the approach of the *Vita Christi* and the *Golden Legend* in this way: "Both medieval authors commend the life of Jesus to the individual believer as the locus of God's salvation of humanity and a source for doctrinal and moral lessons that might be applied to the ongoing conversion and reform of the believer's own life."³ Such a reading is, or should be, a

²Anthony Godzieba, "From 'Vita Christi' to 'Marginal Jew': The Life of Jesus as Criterion of Reform in Pre-critical and Post-critical Quests," KU Leuven Symposium, April 30, 2004 (www.kuleuven.be/theometh/peter/papers/godzieba2.pdf).

³Ibid., 20.

mark of Christian discipleship in any era, and whatever tensions exist between "pre-critical" and "post-critical" approaches, the patrimony of the great spiritual writers of the past can be of great help to us in *praying* the Gospels. There is a growing interest today in *lectio divina*, a way of reading the Bible that can be enriched by use of the traditional spiritual senses of Scripture. In his recent Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (Nov. 11, 2010), Pope Benedict XVI underscored the value of familiarizing ourselves with the exegetical treasures of patristic writings.

In a word, while acknowledging the validity and necessity, as well as the limits, of the historical-critical method, we learn from the Fathers that exegesis "is truly faithful to the proper intention of biblical texts when it goes not only to the heart of their formulation to find the reality of faith there expressed, but also seeks to link this reality to the experience of faith in our present world."⁴

In this introductory essay I will present some background on Ludolph's *Vita Christi*, consider briefly its impact on Saint Ignatius, and then suggest how it can enrich our own spiritual reading of the Gospels.

The *Vita Christi*: Origin, Nature, Purpose

The *Vita Christi*, written during the second half of the fourteenth century, is probably one of the earliest and is certainly the most comprehensive example of a "life of Christ." Why did such an extensive work (well over two thousand pages) appear in the fourteenth century, how did Ludolph organize it, and what was his purpose in writing it? Here it is only possible to give a brief sketch of the elements that helped to shape this remarkable book.

We might say that for the first thousand years of the Christian faith, "the life of Christ" was the Gospels. This is patently true, but several important points must be made. First, the Gospels were not read as a biography of Jesus, as we understand the term. Before the modern era, history and biography were related more to rhetoric than science. The intent was not so much to describe events and analyze their causes and consequences, but to inspire virtue. This does not mean that authors were less conscientious or that readers were more credulous than people today, but it does mean that they had a different understand-

⁴*Verbum Domini*, no. 37. The Pope is citing the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (April 15, 1993), II, A, 2.

ing of history. Second, for Christians in the first millennium, the life of Christ was not only recorded in the Gospels, it was found in the whole Bible. Every page, indeed every detail on every page, was understood to be about Jesus Christ; all of the events recorded in the Old Testament were considered part of his life story. Third, this “life” projected forward as well as backward. The biography of Jesus continued in his Body, the Church, and in the lives of individual members of his Body; and it also offered hints about the world to come. These presuppositions are the basis of a spiritual reading of Scripture, and foundational for what has been called the “four senses” of biblical interpretation (literal, allegorical, moral, eschatological). In this understanding, creation, salvation history, the Church, and the life of every single human person are all part of “the life of Christ.”⁵

The primary place this reading of the life of Christ went on was in the liturgy. The great masters were the Fathers of the Church, who delivered their insights in sermons. For the most part they were not compos-

In his Vita Christi he presented meditations on Christ's life that were intended not only for hermits, monks, and nuns, but also for friars, secular clergy, rulers, and ordinary lay people.

ing scholarly commentaries for the learned; they were teaching the basic doctrines revealed by Christ's life, death, and resurrection, and offering moral instruction to their people drawn from Jesus' example. Liturgical feasts and customs, the sacred images in churches, the association of Old Testament texts

with the various events in the life of Christ—in all of these ways Christians experienced the life of Christ as a present reality. Public reflection on his life was complemented by a personal appropriation through meditation. The pattern of this reflection is described very simply by an early

⁵In *Verbum Domini*, no. 37, Benedict XVI cites the description of the “spiritual sense” given by the Pontifical Biblical Commission: “the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it” (*Interpretation*, II.B.2). He also underscores the relationship between the literal and spiritual senses of Scripture: “Here we can note the unity and interrelation between the *literal sense* and the *spiritual sense*, which for its part is subdivided into three senses which deal with the contents of the faith, with the moral life and with our eschatological aspiration.” *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 115–18, speaks of the four senses of Scripture.

Carthusian writer, quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "Seek in reading and you will find in meditating; knock in mental prayer and it will be opened to you by contemplation" (CCC 2654 [Guigo the Carthusian, *Scala Paradisi*: PL 40,998]). This mental prayer or meditation was a matter of "ruminating," chewing over the word of God.

Beginning in the eleventh century there was a growing emphasis on the humanity of Christ, and especially on his sufferings, which blossomed with particular intensity two hundred years later in the life of St. Francis. We will see in a moment that the Franciscans and other mendicants were great proponents of this spirituality, but it should be noted that they were the inheritors of a tradition that emerged first in the monastic context of meditation on the Scriptures. The prayers of Saint Anselm, for example, "introduced a new note of personal passion, of elaboration and emotional extravagance which anticipated some of the chief features of later medieval piety."⁶ Every detail of Christ's behavior was seen as exemplifying various virtues and providing patterns for us to follow. Peter Damian wrote, "Clearly the life our Savior lived in the flesh, no less than the Gospel he preached, is proposed as the way of life we must embrace."⁷ The great Cistercian figures of the twelfth century, such as Aelred, William of St. Thierry, and Bernard, continued to develop the practice of meditating on the humanity of Christ, and encouraged the use of imagination in pondering the Gospel scenes, inviting their listeners and readers to picture themselves as actually present at the event being considered. According to Giles Constable, "This 'mysticism of the historical event,' as it has been called, combined an ardent concentration on the human life of Christ with an effort to personalize and interiorize His experiences on earth, which occasionally came close to an assimilation or even an identification with Christ."⁸

Both a flowering and a radical shift in this spiritual current took place in the thirteenth century with the growth of the mendicant orders, especially the followers of Saint Francis. By his utter poverty, humility,

⁶R. W. Southern, *Saint Anselm and His Biographer* (Birkbeck Lectures, 1959; Cambridge, 1963), 47.

⁷Bernard, Epistle 4.9, cited in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 144, col. 314D. Migne's *Patrologia* was published in Paris between 1844 and 1864; subsequent citations will be given in abbreviated form (e.g., PL 144:314D). Migne's *Patrologia Græca* will be cited with the abbreviation PG.

⁸Giles Constable, "The Ideal of the Imitation of Christ," in *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 203.

and sufferings, the *Poverello* became a living icon of Christ. The mendicant way of life opened a new chapter in the history of meditation on the life of Christ: no longer was the matrix the monastic community with its structured liturgical life, it was the town square and the lives of ordinary Christians. Bonaventure translated the vision of Francis into words, and in his *Lignum vitæ* and *Vitis mystica* he penned devotional reflections on events in Christ's life. Toward the end of the thirteenth century, a Franciscan named James of Milan wrote a book called the *Stimulus amoris* containing several meditations on the Passion, a work that circulated under Bonaventure's name.

In the fourteenth century several major lives of Christ appeared. Three were written by Augustinian friars: a *Vita Christi* by Michael of Massa, Jordan of Quedlinburg's *Meditationes de passione Christi*, and the *De gestis Domini Salvatoris* by Simon Fidati da Cascia. The Franciscan strain was represented by the *Meditationes vitæ Christi*, written by John de Caulibus, but attributed to Bonaventure. And Ludolph wrote his *Vita Christi*. It is interesting to note that, with the exception of Ludolph, all of these authors were mendicant friars—and it is generally accepted that Ludolph had been a Dominican for many years before joining the Carthusians, so he, too, came from that milieu. This meant that they were composed by men whose vocation was preaching, and the intended audience was not just enclosed monastics, but also people living in the world. Ludolph had joined an eremitical community reputed to be the most austere of religious orders, and the one which was most remote from everyday life; but in his *Vita Christi* he presented meditations on Christ's life that were intended not only for hermits, monks, and nuns, but also for friars, secular clergy, rulers, and ordinary lay people.

Along with this wide audience appeal, what made Ludolph's book an immediate "best seller" was its comprehensiveness. I have briefly indicated several major monuments of Christian spirituality in the centuries preceding Ludolph's life: the biblical texts themselves, patristic homilies, liturgical practices, the works by Benedictine and Cistercian authors, and the writings of mendicant friars. All of these were brought together by Ludolph in his magisterial life of Christ, which begins with the eternal generation of the Son of God and ends with the Last Judgment. The *Vita Christi* is a very long book, to be sure; but it is encyclopedic, bringing together between two covers a wealth of spiritual reflection on the life of Christ. The numerous manuscript copies of the *Vita Christi* in European libraries testify to its popularity, and since its first printing in 1472 more than sixty editions have been produced. It

has also been translated into several Romance and Germanic languages, but not into English. Along with its celebrated impact on Saint Ignatius Loyola, the *Vita Christi* was also treasured by such great saints as Teresa of Avila, Francis de Sales, Robert Bellarmine, and Alphonsus Liguori.

As will be seen in the Prologue which is presented here, Ludolph made no claims to originality; rather, he sought to compile commentaries on events in Christ's life from a variety of authors. The Fathers whom he quotes in the Prologue are

The fourteenth century was marked by the scourge of the Black Death, tremendous social upheaval, and the decline of medieval culture after its high-water mark in the preceding century.

Ambrose, Augustine, Bede, Bernard, Chrysostom, and Gregory the Great. These, together with Anselm, are the authors most frequently cited in the body of the work, but he quotes over sixty Christian writers in all. Ludolph often cites Fathers without attribution,

and even more frequently writers closer to his own time: four-fifths of the Prologue is taken from other works. The major borrowings Ludolph makes will be indicated in the text.

It cannot be denied that the *Vita Christi* strikes the modern reader as lengthy and somewhat repetitive, but this prolixity is intentional. Ludolph wants his reader to savor the event under consideration, and to keep viewing it from different perspectives.⁹ He gives this advice toward the beginning of the Prologue: "[T]ake care to do this with deliberation, and not hurry through the reading of Christ's life; rather, take a small section in turn each day. With such devout reflections you can celebrate a daily Sabbath for Christ."¹⁰ Charles Conway describes Ludolph's technique in this way:

His meditations are infused with references to theological authority, appeals to the response of the reader, references to contemporary Church and society, allusions to the Liturgy, all set forth with a view of creating a harmony of images which will finally illuminate the doctrine and the text. Much of the diversity and diffuse-

⁹This pattern may have helped inspire the use of "repetitions" in the *Spiritual Exercises* (nos. 62, 118–19), and Ignatius's suggestion that retreatants dwell reflectively on the principal places where they experienced spiritual grace (no. 227).

¹⁰Prologue, 26.

ness in the structure of the work springs from the various kinds of amplification Ludolph uses: explication of words, images on the allegorical level, liturgical and ceremonial references, references to ecclesiastical governance, comments on society, and distinctions and classifications.¹¹

There is, however, a discernible pattern followed in each chapter, a pattern inspired by the spiritual reading of Scripture through a process of *lectio divina*. Ludolph begins with the biblical text, providing historical, geographical, or legal background where necessary, and invites the reader to enter imaginatively into the event. This corresponds to the literal sense, and the stage in *lectio* of reading. This is followed by an exploration of the text along moral and spiritual lines, a meditation that offers various allegorical meanings and personal applications, concluding with an invitation for the reader to conform himself or herself to the mystery under consideration. This conformation usually invites the reader to ponder carefully all that has been presented, and the chapter ends with a prayer that succinctly summarizes the main points that had been developed at length previously. The constitutive elements of this pattern all appear in the Prologue, and we will explore what Ludolph's approach has to teach us. But first let us consider briefly what Ignatius Loyola learned from the *Vita Christi*.

Ludolph and Ignatius

In the mid-twentieth century the eminent Jesuit theologian Hugo Rahner observed that the *Spiritual Exercises* had been researched from every angle to discern its real or pretended sources. He then asked, "What, in the end, was the upshot of all these laborious inquiries? Nothing but the single fact that Iñigo read only these three books: *The Life of Christ* by Ludolph of Saxony, *The Golden Legend*, and *The Imitation of Christ*."¹² Ludolph's life of Christ played an important role in Ignatius's conversion, and during his convalescence he copied out selections from it filling three hundred pages; its influence on the *Spiritual Exercises* has been the subject of some study, at least as far back as the late-nineteenth cen-

¹¹ Charles Abbot Conway Jr., *The "Vita Christi" of Ludolph of Saxony and Late Medieval Devotion Centred on the Incarnation: A Descriptive Analysis* (Salzburg: Analecta Carthusiana 34, 1976), 46–47.

¹² Hugo Rahner, *The Spirituality of Saint Ignatius Loyola: An Account of Its Historical Development*, trans. Francis J. Smith (Westminster, Md., 1953), 24.

ture.¹³ The most extensive examination in English to date is Paul Shore's fine essay in an earlier volume of *STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS: The "Vita Christi" of Ludolph of Saxony and Its Influence on the "Spiritual Exercises" of Ignatius of Loyola* (30/1, January 1998). George Ganss, S.J., has also written about Ignatius's debt to Ludolph, both in his General Introduction to *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991) and in his own translation of the *Exercises*, entitled *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Translation and Commentary* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992). I will briefly summarize some of the points made by Shore and Ganss.

While we are conscious of the cultural gap that separates us from both the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, Shore draws our attention to the fact that Ludolph and Ignatius themselves inhabited somewhat different worlds. The fourteenth century was marked by the scourge of the Black Death, tremendous social upheaval, and the decline of medieval culture after its high-water mark in the preceding century. Ignatius lived in the age of exploration, Renaissance splendor, and Reformation conflict, and at a time of economic prosperity in Spain. And yet, Shore suggests, on a deeper level they had much in common.

Both viewed their encounter with Christ as a personal experience, one that directly affected the individual without contradicting or superseding the sacraments or the institutional Church that was so sacred to both of them. Both saw solitary, sincerely felt prayer as a crucial means of establishing contact with God. And both recognized the importance of communicating their understanding of the divine through means easily understood by persons of all backgrounds.¹⁴

Ludolph's *Vita Christi* presents a magisterial panorama of the whole of salvation history, beginning with the eternal generation of the Son and ending with his return in glory. Ganss says that this provided a construct for Ignatius and shaped his way of thinking, perhaps in unconscious as well as conscious ways. An initial glance at the *Vita Christi* might suggest that Ludolph could have done with a good editor, but his detailed presentations and repeated applications of the Gospel scenes to

¹³Henri Watrigant, *La genèse des exercices de Saint Ignace de Loyola* (Amiens, 1897), 17–22, 79–88. See also Emmerich Raitz von Frentz, "Ludolphe le Chartreux et les Exercices de S. Ignace," in *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique*, 25 (1949): 376–88.

¹⁴Shore, *Vita Christi*, 4.

daily life have a purpose: “to always be thinking somehow about Jesus, so that you are striving to imitate him more closely or love him more deeply.”¹⁵ Ludolph’s thorough, orderly account of creation and redemption would have sunk deep into Ignatius’s memory. Ganss writes that

Ignatius absorbed this sequence in his reading, probably without noticing the fact; but in this way God’s salvific plan became the core of his thought and, like a rolling snowball, it picked up additions for the rest of his life. It was to become the viewpoint from which he appraised all things in life.¹⁶

Ludolph did not only provide an overarching vision of the panorama of salvation, he filled the canvas with detailed pictures from the life of Christ, and made that life accessible to Ignatius. The importance

Take it as a general rule that wherever you do not find material for reflection in following a narrative, it suffices to picture in your mind’s eye something the Lord Jesus said or did, and simply talk with him so that you might become more familiar with him.

of this contribution cannot be overstated: at the time of his conversion Ignatius was unable to read Latin and there was no Spanish translation of the New Testament; the *Vita Christi*, published in Castilian in 1503, was the version of the Gospel available to Ignatius. His reliance on Ludolph is apparent throughout the *Spiritu-*

al Exercises in the meditations suggested for each Week and the mysteries listed at the end of the book, both of which follow the sequence laid down in the *Vita Christi*.¹⁷

At the very beginning of his Prologue, Ludolph sketches out the dynamic one should follow in reading the life of Christ: it begins with sincere conversion and confession, and moves to an ongoing companionship with the Divine Physician, in which the reader spends time repeatedly meditating on the events in his life. As Ganss perceptively notes, this was the pattern followed by Ignatius himself: repentance and confession at Montserrat, intense union with Christ at Manresa. This

¹⁵ Prologue, 38.

¹⁶ Ganss, *Ignatius of Loyola*, 25.

¹⁷ This includes the appearances of the risen Christ to his Mother and Joseph of Arimathea, not recorded in Scripture; these each have a chapter devoted to them in the *Vita Christi*.

pattern in turn influenced the structure of the *Exercises*: a week devoted to repentance, followed by three weeks of close association with Christ, pondering the mysteries of his life.¹⁸

Ludolph urges his readers to employ all their senses to enter into the Gospel scene, an idea that forms a leitmotif of the *Exercises*. The Carthusian frequently invites us to pause and savor an event in Christ’s life, and he exhorts us to feel various emotions appropriate to the mystery under consideration. But his purpose is not simply to excite our affection for Christ (as important as this is), but to deepen our conversion. Shore quotes a scholar of Ludolph, Walter Baier, on this point.

The aim of the meditations is to renew the image of God that has been obscured in the man: renewing the memory (*memoria*) through recollection (*recordatio*), renewing the knowledge through wisdom, and renewing the will through love.¹⁹

Reference to memory, knowledge, and will roots Ludolph’s purpose in the Augustinian doctrine that the image of the Triune God in our souls is reflected in the faculties of our memory, understanding, and will. By meditating on the events of Christ’s life with these faculties, we are opening ourselves up to the grace that will conform us more and more to Christ, and restore the divine image in us that has been marred by sin.

Scholars have suggested a wide variety of specific images or terms from Ludolph’s work that have found their way into the *Spiritual Exercises*, but we will not explore them here. What we have seen is that Ludolph bequeathed to Ignatius a comprehensive vision of salvation history, a detailed presentation of Christ’s life, and helpful methods for meditating on that life. Another connection should be noted, however. One of the hallmarks of Ignatian spirituality generally, and of the *Exercises* in particular, is the freedom enjoyed by the exercitant and director in approaching the mysteries of the life of Christ in the way most beneficial to the individual. This liberty of spirit finds expression in Ludolph’s book as well. Toward the end of his Prologue he says that in the *Vita Christi* he will describe events as they occurred, or might have occurred, using imaginative representations that strike the mind in different ways. Then he says:

¹⁸ Ganss, *Ignatius Loyola*, 21–22.

¹⁹ Shore, *Vita Christi*, 6. The original source of the citation is Walter Baier, “Ludolph de Saxe,” in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, ed. M. Viller et al. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1976) 9:1136.

For we can consider, understand, and express the meaning of sacred Scripture in as many ways as we find helpful, provided they are not contrary to the truth of life, justice, or doctrine; in other words, so long as they are not contrary to faith and morals.²⁰

So even Ludolph's exhaustive presentation is not seen to be the last word. It remains a means, not an end, and the reader should not have scruples about putting it aside.

Take it as a general rule that wherever you do not find material for reflection in following a narrative, it suffices to picture in your mind's eye something the Lord Jesus said or did, and simply talk with him so that you might become more familiar with him.²¹

This liberty of spirit is married to a profound commitment to follow Christ, and Paul Shore suggests that one source of Ignatian *magis* may be found in Ludolph's book.

A narrative with dynamic, even theatrical qualities, the *Vita* presents the life of its subject as an action-filled career and a mission fraught with consequences for humankind. For the young Ignatius, the would-be knight-errant, as well as for many Jesuits who came after him, the call to service embodied in the *Vita* would be decisive.²²

How to Pray the Life of Christ

Let us now consider what help Ludolph can give us today when we open the Gospels to meditate on the life of Christ. First we will consider the literal reading of the text. It seems to some that the adoption of a historical-critical approach to biblical study in the twentieth century created a seismic shift that opened a chasm separating us from the centuries of biblical interpretation that went before. It is facile to dismiss past generations as naive in accepting biblical stories as literally true, or of being so preoccupied with allegorical interpretations as to be unconcerned about what "really" happened. There can be no doubt that a fourteenth-century author did not possess the historical tools at our disposal; still, it should be noted how much Ludolph did draw on the

²⁰ Prologue, 38.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

²² Shore, *Vita Christi*, 16–17.

historical tools that were available to him. For example, throughout the *Vita Christi* he makes use of guidebooks to the Holy Land, notably that of Burchard of Mt. Sion, which he quotes in the Prologue. And he tells us why he does this.

This is why sometimes I describe the locations where events took place: when we read in the Gospel that this or that action happened in a certain place, it is very helpful to know something about where it occurred.²³

He frequently provides background information on ancient laws and customs, and employs the science of his day when discussing phenomena like the Christmas star or the Good Friday darkness. The point is not whether the information is correct (it sometimes is not), but that it shows that Ludolph valued the contribution historical and scientific resources made to an understanding of the literal meaning of the text. We are blessed to have many biblical commentaries today that incorporate the fruits of scholarly biblical research, and Ludolph's example encourages us to read them.

Along with employing historical resources to examine the literal meaning of a passage, Ludolph does something else which may strike us as audacious: he interpolates

Ludolph pulls the Gospel past into the present in many ways: liturgical ceremonies, religious customs, nature's seasons and elements, family and social life are all used as hooks to help readers see the life of Christ unfolding now in their own lives and in the life of the world around them.

phrases into the biblical texts he quotes. For example, we read the following citation toward the beginning of the Prologue: "*Come to me all you that labor with the toil of vices and are burdened with the baggage of your sins, and I will refresh you by healing and reviving you; and you shall find rest to your souls, here and hereafter*"²⁴ (Matt. 11:28–29). The technique is not original with him (in this instance he is citing Guigo de Ponte), but it is a practice he uses repeatedly throughout the *Vita Christi*. Why does he do this? Paradoxically, I think, because the additions give the words a freshness and immediacy that heighten their impact. Many

²³Prologue, 39.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 25.

people in his day knew a good part of the Gospels by heart; by interpolating descriptive words, the sentences become more “conversational” and vivid. Ludolph also supplies concrete details to flesh out the literal meaning of the text, and he does so to excite the reader’s imagination. A striking example is his use of the description of Jesus’ appearance, presumed in Ludolph’s day to be contemporaneous with the life of Christ.²⁵ Throughout the Prologue Ludolph, or more precisely, the authors he brings together, exhort us to *see*, to *picture*, to *imagine*, to *put ourselves* into the scene being contemplated. We are to go back in time and actually enter the story as it unfolds. Throughout the *Vita Christi* Ludolph appeals to our senses. All of this is done to enrich our reading of Christ’s life, to make its events as vivid and three-dimensional as possible.

But this appeal to “what happened” is only the prelude to a more important question: “What does it mean to me now?” This is where we make the transition from reading to meditation, to a consideration of the spiritual meaning of Scripture. It has been suggested that where the *Meditationes vitæ Christianæ* sought to make the Gospel come alive by appealing to the imaginative and emotional response of the reader, Ludolph seeks rather to bring the past into the present, to move us from admiration to imitation.

In the Passion of the *Meditationes* we see Christ’s patience, humility, and charity. Yet the focus is on admiring these virtues rather than on imitation and implementation. . . . Ludolph, on the other hand, sees the Passion as a textbook for the Christian life (VC, 4–5) and thus often tries to apply the virtues expressed throughout the Passion to the present Church situation. The *Vita* does not reject the idea that Christ is the object of meditation, it simply tends to focus on another idea: Christ as the example for all humankind.²⁶

Ludolph urges his reader to “read what once happened as if it were happening here and now.”²⁷ To help us do this, he pulls the Gospel past into the present in many ways: liturgical ceremonies, religious customs, nature’s seasons and elements, family and social life are all used as hooks to help readers see the life of Christ unfolding now in their

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁶ Lawrence F. Hundersmarck, “Preaching the Passion: Late Medieval ‘Lives of Christ’ as Sermon Vehicles,” in *De Ore Domini: Preacher and Word in the Middle Ages*, ed. Thomas Amos et al. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1989), 161–62.

²⁷ Prologue, 39.

own lives and in the life of the world around them. Christ's life is not a movie, it is a script, a script that we are performing. For example, Ludolph likens the priest or communicant approaching the altar to Mary Magdalen in the garden on Easter morning. "If she—who was privileged to be the first to see the risen Christ after his Mother, and who was so loved by the One who had delivered her from all of her sins—was prevented from touching his feet, how much more should those who are polluted by sin refrain from touching him by celebrating Mass or receiving Holy Communion?"²⁸

Although Ludolph occasionally presents allegorical interpretations to recall Christian doctrines, his major emphasis is on the moral instruction found in the Gospel. As he says toward the beginning of the Prologue, "Meditate on the life of Christ with a thirst to put into practice what you read there—it does little good to read unless you seek to imitate."²⁹ Meditation means going beneath the surface of the events in Christ's life to the underlying attitudes and virtues that they offer for our instruction. Saint Bernard asks: "What do you know about virtues, if you are ignorant of Christ, who is the virtue of God? Where, I ask, is true prudence, except in Christ's teaching? Where is true virtue, except in Christ's mercy? Where is true temperance, except in Christ's life? Where is true fortitude, except in Christ's Passion?"³⁰

Ludolph does not spell out the dialogue; he simply urges us to have it. In the stages of reading and meditating, we exercise an active role, whereas in prayer we provide an opening for Christ to speak and act.

In effect, the reading of the Gospels should be an exercise in ongoing conversion. The *Vita Christi* does not inculcate a literal imitation of events in the life of Christ (a point which is significant when we realize that in Ludolph's lifetime there was a revival of the Flagellant movement). Nor was it written to express (or incite) the kind of extraordinary union with Christ experienced by the great mystics. Ludolph's audience is ordinary believers, in every state of life, and his purpose is to encourage them to ponder and make their own the virtues underlying Christ's actions. These are ordinary traits: patience, gentleness,

²⁸ *Vita Christi*, II, 72.

²⁹ Prologue, 26.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

fidelity, obedience, and, above all, humility. In one sense, it might fairly be asked, "Why take two thousand pages to answer the question, 'What would Jesus do?'" The answer is that the *sequela Christi* is the work of a lifetime; Ludolph is in it for the long haul. As he exhorts the reader at the end of the Prologue, "Examine diligently, ponder attentively, tease out scrupulously every detail in the life of Jesus Christ, and follow in your Lord's footsteps."³¹

Meditation on the life of Christ does not only make past events present; it reminds us that Christ himself is present, and that he gives us the grace to follow his example. The awareness of his presence moves us from meditation to prayer. "The Gospels form the substance of the *Vita Christi*, but prayer is its spirit."³² Ludolph suggests this transition to prayer in different ways. He concludes each chapter (including the Prologue) with a brief prayer, ordinarily addressed to Christ, which summarizes the major themes of that chapter. These prayers are his original compositions, and have been published occasionally on their own

Ludolph recognizes that prayer can lead to a foretaste of heavenly glory in contemplation, but contemplation is God's gift, not our achievement.

in devotional books. He inserts similar prayers seventy times throughout his chapters on Christ's Passion. Another method Ludolph uses occasionally is to suggest that the reader pause and "compassionate" with Jesus or other

figures in the story. This is not just an impetus to respond on an emotional level to the Gospel scene, it is an invitation to converse familiarly with Christ who is present. The meditations in the *Vita Christi* constantly ring the changes on the hymn in Philippians about Christ humbly emptying himself; Ludolph's subtle invitations to prayer suggest the phrase which prompted Paul to quote the hymn, "Let the same mind be in you that you have in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). We receive the mind of Christ from Christ himself, through intimate conversation with him. Because this is a very personal matter, Ludolph does not spell out the dialogue; he simply urges us to have it. In the stages of reading and meditating,

³¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

³² Sr. Mary Immaculate Bodenstedt, S.N.D., *The "Vita Christi" of Ludolph the Carthusian* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1944), 117. Sister Bodenstedt's doctoral dissertation, the most comprehensive examination of the *Vita Christi* available in English, has recently been reprinted in *Ludolphus the Carthusian: "Vita Christi" Introductory Volume* (Salzburg: Analecta Cartusiana, 2007).

we exercise an active role, whereas in prayer we provide an opening for Christ to speak and act. This is why Ludolph encourages his readers not to rely on their own merits. "[R]ather, let them approach the Lord to beg alms with empty hands, conscious that they are merely paupers, possessing nothing."³³ Because, as he says at the very outset of the Prologue, we are an abyss of need and God is a plenitude of abundance, we should not doubt that Jesus will help us. "Tell him everything, entrust everything to him, cast all your cares upon him—he will calm the storm and relieve you."³⁴

In our prayer we unite ourselves with Christ in pondering the mysteries of his life—but we do not do this only for the sake of following him more closely. In an introductory chapter to his meditations on the Passion, Ludolph suggests six different motivations for our prayer.

In summary, with regard to the Passion there ought to be imitation for purification and direction, compassion for union and love, admiration for elevation of the mind, rejoicing and exultation for expansion of the heart, transformation for perfect conformity, rest and lingering over it for the consummation of devotion.³⁵

His description of the transformative element is worth quoting.

Fifthly, let us meditate on the most blessed Passion of Christ so that our hearts will be poured out into Christ by a perfect transformation into him. This takes place when we not only imitate him, share his sorrows, marvel [at God's love] and rejoice [in the redemption won by the Cross], but when, in a manner of speaking, our whole being melts into our Lord Jesus Christ crucified. When it seems to you that the crucified Lord hastens to meet you practically everywhere, you are truly being dissolved into Christ: turning away from yourself, lifted above the world, and detached from all things, you are entirely transformed into your suffering Lord.³⁶

Here Ludolph is speaking of the sorrowful mysteries, but what he says is applicable to the joyful and glorious mysteries as well: frequent, prayer-

³³ Prologue, 30.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁵ *Vita Christi*, II.58.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

ful meditation on the life of Christ can, to the extent we open ourselves to grace, enable us to see Christ in everything and everyone.

And beyond this world? Ludolph says that praying the life of Christ “marks the beginning of that profound contemplation we long for in the angelic, eternal life of our true homeland.”³⁷ Jesus’ life did not end in death, nor will ours.

If you have followed him for a little while on earth with a godly, humble, and loving heart, he in turn will raise you up to sit with him at the right hand of God the Father in Heaven, just as he promised the faithful sinner who clings to him: “*If any man minister to me, let him follow me: and where I am, there also shall my minister be.*”³⁸ (John 12:26)

Ludolph recognizes that prayer can lead to a foretaste of heavenly glory in contemplation, but contemplation is God’s gift, not our achievement. At the end of two thousand pages of meditation, the author adverts to this possibility, but still emphasizes that meditation on the life of Christ remains indispensable.

This meditation on the life of Christ is not only sweet nourishment in itself, it also carries you on to higher food. These are the things Christ did in the flesh, but it is a far more sublime thing to behold him in the spirit. You can arrive there with this ladder, but here you must linger in the meantime. Those who ascend to higher realms of contemplation must not however set this aside for the time being, because that would be a mark of great presumption and pride. This is why Bernard, who scaled the heights of contemplative prayer, never set aside the life of Christ, as you can see above in the Prologue.³⁹

This Translation of the Prologue

The *Vita Christi* has never been translated into English. In 1887 the English Jesuit Henry James Coleridge published a translation of the ten chapters of the work dedicated to the Passion, and in 1973 Sr. Mary Immaculate Bodenstedt produced an English translation of the prayers

³⁷ Prologue, 29.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

³⁹ *Vita Christi*, II.89.

with which Ludolph concluded each of his chapters.⁴⁰ It may be that Ludolph's prolixity worked against him (Coleridge's translation of ten chapters—out of 181!—fills 450 pages) and it has been suggested that the immense popularity of an English translation of the *Meditationes vitae Christi* written in 1410 by Ludolph's fellow Carthusian Nicholas Love (*The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*), may have met the needs of the Anglophone market. To my knowledge this is the first time an English translation of the Prologue to the *Vita Christi* has been made.

Popularity and prolixity have combined to militate against a critical edition of Ludolph's *Vita Christi*: the vast number of extant manuscripts and the many printed editions make such a project a herculean task. The most recent Latin editions were published in the nineteenth century, a folio edition in 1865 (Paris: Victor Palmé) and two octavo editions of four volumes in 1870 and 1878 (Paris: Rigollot). My own copy is the 1870 edition, which I have occasionally compared with older printed versions. I have found practically no variations in the text itself, although in Coleridge's opinion the patristic references given in the nineteenth-century edition are less accurate than those found in earlier editions. As part of this translation project, I have identified the sources for Ludolph's patristic citations, usually in Migne's patrology. In translating Ludolph, in the text I give the patristic source as he has it, but where in fact the author is different, I indicate this in the footnote.

Ludolph's advice on how to read the Gospels can help us transform information about Jesus to a personal encounter with him.

In introducing his translation, Coleridge made the following comment:

I hope that the translation will be found accurate and helpful, but it must be remembered that Ludolph is not always a perfectly lucid writer, and I have preferred a rather close translation to a vague paraphrase. Thus there may be, here and there, passages in

⁴⁰ Henry James Coleridge, S.J., *The Hours of the Passion Taken from the "Life of Christ" by Ludolph the Saxon*, in *Quarterly Series*, 59 (London: Burns and Oates, 1887); Sr. Mary Immaculate Bodenstedt, S.N.D., *Praying the Life of Christ: First English Translation of the Prayers Concluding the 181 Chapters of the "Vita Christi" of Ludolphus the Carthusian; The Quintessence of His Devout Meditations on the Life of Christ* (Salzburg: *Analecta Cartusiana*, 1973).

which the rugged simplicity of the original may be too closely reflected to please the indolence of some modern readers.⁴¹

I take a different approach in my translation (and not only because of the indolence of modern readers!). While I hope that this is not a “vague paraphrase,” it is my purpose to make Ludolph’s writing as accessible as possible to contemporary readers. His style can be repetitive, and he shares with many other Latin authors a tendency to write very lengthy sentences, which are a challenge for us to digest. My guide is Ronald Knox, who in his last public appearance gave a lecture on English translation. Although a man of classical training and conservative tastes, Knox argued that a translation should be literary first, and literal afterwards.

You shall do a disservice to your original if the reader puts your translation down almost at once, saying, “I expect this stuff would be rather fine, *if one knew Greek*.” You have got to make him say “This is fine,” whatever sacrifice of literalness it may involve.⁴²

A particular challenge today concerns inclusive language. My solution is to use first and second person pronouns—which in fact Ludolph himself does often. I believe this not only avoids a quagmire, but is in keeping with the conversational, meditative tone of the *Vita Christi*. I have

Those who are illumined by this light learn to set proper priorities, giving themselves first to Christ and then to godly concerns, their own, their neighbor’s, and those of the world.

used the Challoner revision of the Douay-Rheims translation of the Vulgate because Ludolph almost always cites the Vulgate, which varies at times from the original Hebrew or Greek and from modern English translations made from these. The language is a bit archaic to our ears (as the Vulgate may have sounded to readers in the fourteenth century), but the Douay-Rheims conveys the biblical texts used by Ludolph, and the change to more contemporary English in his

interpolations makes them more evident.

⁴¹ Coleridge, *Hours of the Passion*, v.

⁴² R. A. Knox, *On English Translation: The Romanes Lecture Delivered in the Sheldonian Theatre, June 11, 1957* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 5.

When the young Ignatius opened the pages of the *Vita Christi* to while away the hours of his convalescence, he found himself entering a new world, a world whose values and priorities differed from the courtly life he knew so well. That encounter, by God’s grace, changed his whole life. As we turn now to the Prologue of that work, we too encounter a text that is foreign to us. Ludolph’s painstaking compilation of his sources, written in an era when every document had to be copied by hand, is worlds away from the wealth of material available to us today at the click of a button. But the blessings of modern technology carry with them a potential threat: we can drown in a sea of data. “To be always thinking somehow about Jesus” is at the heart of our spiritual growth, and Ludolph’s advice on how to read the Gospels can help us transform information *about* Jesus to a personal encounter *with* him.

II. The Prologue of the *Vita Christi*

“What can compare with abiding continually with Christ?”

*For other foundation no man can lay, the Apostle says, but that which is laid: which is Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 3:11).*⁴³ Augustine tells us that God is the plenitude of abundance and humanity is an abyss of need, and God’s goodness is such that nothing can go well when one turns away from him.⁴⁴ Since this is so, you must not forsake this foundation if you want to escape the ruin caused by your failings and replenish your spirit; here you will find every kind of remedy for your needs.

First, anyone who wishes to lay down the burden of sins and attain peace of heart should heed God’s gracious invitation addressed to sinners: “*Come to me all you that labor with the toil of vices and are burdened with the baggage of your sins, and I will refresh you by healing and reviving you; and you shall find rest to your souls, here and hereafter*” (Matt. 11:28–29). Listen, patient, to your loving and devoted physician; come to him with heartfelt contrition, sincere confession, and the firm intention to avoid evil and do good.

Next, the sinner who already faithfully believes in Christ and has been reconciled to him through penance should strive to stay close to this physician by devoutly meditating on his most holy life as much as possible. But take care to do this with deliberation, and not hurry through the reading of Christ’s life; rather, take a small selection in turn each day. With such devout reflections you can celebrate a daily Sabbath for Christ: your thoughts, feelings, prayers, praises, and all of your daily work will lead to this, and you will find delight in it. Here you will find a respite from the din of distractions and worldly preoccupations, and you will enjoy sweet repose. Wherever you may be, return often here; this is a sure and holy refuge to protect you from the manifold varieties of human weakness that constantly assail God’s servants. Frequently

⁴³The first several pages of Ludolph’s Prologue are taken almost entirely from book 2 of *On Contemplation* by the Carthusian Guigo de Ponte (d. 1297). This book was often attributed to Guigo I, fifth prior of the Carthusians (d. 1136); it was not well known, but Ludolph’s use of it in his Prologue gave these pages wide circulation. Guigo emphasizes the connection between meditation on the life of Christ and contemplation. See Dennis Martin, *Carthusian Spirituality: The Writings of Hugh of Balma and Guigo de Ponte* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 197–202.

⁴⁴PL 32:870; *Solil.* 1.3 (approximate).

consider the major events in Christ's life: his Incarnation, birth, circumcision, epiphany, presentation in the Temple, Passion, Resurrection, Ascension, sending of the Holy Spirit, and his second coming as Judge. Do this with an eye to definite spiritual recollection, self-discipline, and consolation. Meditate on the life of Christ with a thirst to put into practice what you read there—it does little good to read unless you seek to imitate. Bernard asks, "What does it profit you to repeatedly read the Savior's good name in books, unless you are trying to be good in your conduct?"⁴⁵ And Chrysostom writes: "Whoever reads about God wants to find God. Let us hasten to live in a way worthy of God: our good behavior will be like a lamp shining before the eyes of our heart, showing us the way of truth."⁴⁶

There are many reasons why this way of living should be a sinner's greatest aspiration. First, for the forgiveness of sins: when we judge ourselves, accuse ourselves in confession, and freely undertake penance, we are already delivered in no small measure from the squalor of sin; we walk attentively with God and are meditating in the aforesaid manner. *For our God is a consuming fire*, purifying those who cling to him of their sins (Heb. 12:29).

Second, for enlightenment: the One who comes to our aid is *a light shining in the darkness* (John 1:5). Those who are illumined by this light learn to set proper priorities, giving themselves first to Christ and then to godly concerns, their own, their neighbor's, and those of the world. Third, for the gift of

What can compare with abiding continually with Christ, on whom the angels desire to look? (1 Pet. 1:12). If you wish to reign with Christ forever, begin to reign with him now; do not abandon him, for to serve him is to reign.

tears: these are so necessary for a sinner in this miserable valley. Christ, who is *the fountain of gardens and the well of living waters*, customarily gives these to one who stays close to him (Song 4:15). Fourth, for renewal after the sinful lapses of daily life: the Lord always lifts up those who cling to him, as he says: "*Make a brazen serpent, and set it up for a sign: whosoever being struck shall look on it, shall live*" (Num. 21:8). Fifth, because of the sweet and longed-for taste, this practice holds for those who possess it, as the Psalmist says: *O taste, and see that the Lord is sweet*

⁴⁵ PL 183:843B; *Serm. Cant.* 14.8.

⁴⁶ PG 59:453; *Hom. Ps.* 45.5.

(Ps. 33:9). Sixth, for the knowledge of the Father's majesty, which can be had only through Christ, as he himself teaches: "*Neither does any one know the Father, but the Son, and he to whom it shall please the Son to reveal him*" (Matt. 11:27). Seventh, for the sure deliverance from this world's dangers that it offers: faithful sinners who daily welcome Christ into their hearts and make a bower for him from these sweet meditations will in turn be sought out and welcomed by Christ after death. What they longed for and grew accustomed to here below they will enjoy forever: life with Christ.

This is a blessed, well-watered way of life; it purifies and renews sinners who cling to it, making them fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. To live like this is sweet and lovely: *her conversation hath no bitterness, nor her company any tediousness, but joy and gladness* (Wis. 8:16). This food is so agreeable and delicious that, once a loving heart has tasted it, all other practices will seem bland. It nourishes and refreshes, for as Ambrose observes, those who receive Christ into their inner dwelling feed on the greatest delights and abundant pleasures.⁴⁷ It is the consolation of the solitary, for whom it is the best of companions, giving joy, comfort, and solace; for the sinner it is *a tower of strength against the face of the enemy* (Ps. 60:4). This way of life offers an easy and thorough way to contemplate the Creator—a duty from which none may excuse themselves—because there is no faster way to reach the heights of God's majesty than by meditating on the life of our Redeemer. Everyone can follow this practice, the young beginner as well as those advanced in the spiritual life, and all find here a pleasant home in which to nest like a dove, and a hiding place for the offspring of their chaste love.

This meditation makes the saints loving, solicitous, and favorable to those who invoke them because of the joy we share with them. For example, could the Blessed Virgin, the Mother of mercy, tenderness, and grace, possibly despise you or turn her eyes from you, sinner though you are, when she sees you take her Son—whom she loves above all—into your arms and hold him close to your breast, and this not just once a day, but frequently? Could she possibly desert you when she sees you holding her Son each and every day, attending to every detail of his life, and offering him every service of devotion and affection? Certainly not. So it is with the other saints: they look gladly on those with whom God is pleased to dwell; this way of life turns their clients into their com-

⁴⁷ PL 15:1640B; *Exp. Ev. Lc.* 5.16.

panions, because this is their way of life, too. Clearly this is the life of Christ's Mother, who served him and cared for him for so many years. This is the life of the Apostles, his intimate companions, who persevered faithfully with him. This is the life of the heavenly citizens who enjoy Christ, marvel at his wondrous works, and reverently attend him for all eternity.

Here we find what is truly the best part: to sit at the feet of Christ and listen to his words. Rightly, it is not taken away from one who by grace possesses it, for this is the reward promised to the good and faithful servant, a life begun here on earth but completed in eternity. No tongue can sufficiently praise this way of life, which is truly good, holy, and more eminent than any other: it marks the beginning of that profound contemplation we

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long for in the angelic, eternal life of our true homeland. What can compare with abiding continually with Christ, *on whom the angels desire to look?* (1 Pet. 1:12). If you wish to reign with Christ forever, begin to reign with him now; do not abandon him, for to serve him is to reign.

Draw near to him who descends from the bosom of the Father into the Virgin's womb. Come forward with pure faith as another witness with the angel to his holy conception. Rejoice with the Virgin Mother who is made fruitful for your sake. Be present at his birth and circumcision as a good provider with Joseph. Go with the Magi to Bethlehem and adore the infant King. Help his parents carry Jesus when they present him in the Temple. In company with the Apostles, follow the loving Shepherd about as he performs remarkable miracles. Be present as he dies, sharing in the sorrows of his Blessed Mother and John and consoling them; with devout curiosity touch and caress each wound of the Savior who died for you. Search for the risen one with Mary Magdalen until you deserve to find him. Marvel at his glorious ascension into Hh-Sit with the Apostles in conclave, removed from all external distractions, so that you may deserve to be clothed from on high with the power of the Holy Spirit. If you have followed him for a little while on earth with a godly, humble, and loving heart, he in turn will raise you up to sit with him at the right hand of God the Father in heaven, just as he promised

the faithful sinner who clings to him: “*If any man minister to me, let him follow me: and where I am, there also shall my minister be*” (John 12:26).

Faithful sinners who lovingly embrace this way of life should never doubt that Christ adopts them as daughters and sons. As it says in the Book of Proverbs, “*I love them that love me*” (Prov. 8:17). Bernard writes, “God cannot please the person who is not pleasing to him; for if God is pleasing to someone, that one cannot displease God.”⁴⁸ Let faithful sinners prudently beware of relying on their own merits, no matter what

Our gentle commander wants his loyal soldiers to lift up their faces and eyes to his wounds: they will strengthen their resolve and teach them how to bear up more courageously.

their condition; rather, let them approach the Lord to beg alms with empty hands, conscious that they are merely paupers, possessing nothing. But do not do this out of false humility, concealing merits, but know with utter certainty that *in thy sight no man living shall be justified* (Ps. 142:2). The fact is, we

cannot render an account for even a single thought should God choose to enter into judgment with us. Those who throw themselves devoutly and with reverent fear upon the good God who calls sinners will not be considered presumptuous. It is just like beggars in this world: they are thought to be more wretched, not more admirable, in proportion to their need; they are not held to be presumptuous or proud—on the contrary, generous benefactors view them with greater pity. [*The borrowing from Guigo de Ponte ends here.*]

Saint Bernard meditated continually, collecting a bundle of myrrh, that is, an accumulation of bitter recollections from the life and sufferings of Christ, which he pressed between his breasts, that is, in his affectionate heart. He advises us: “If you are wise, you will imitate the prudent bride and never let this precious bundle of myrrh be removed from your bosom for even an hour. Preserve without fail the memory of those bitter trials he endured for you, and meditate upon them frequently. Then you, too, can say, ‘*A bundle of myrrh is my beloved to me, he shall abide between my breasts*’ (Song 1:12). As for me, friends, I have been conscious of my lack of merits from the early days of my conversion, so I have undertaken to collect a bundle from my Lord’s anxieties and suf-

⁴⁸ PL 183:899A; *Serm. Cant.* 24.8.

ferings and hold it close to my breast. First there were the privations in his infancy; then his labors in preaching, his weariness in journeying, his vigils in praying, his temptations in fasting, his tears in compassion, his disputes in teaching; finally peril from false friends, insults, spitting, blows, mockery, and scorn; the nails and other torments that fill the pages of the Gospel like trees in a forest—and all for the salvation of our race. Among the many twigs of this fragrant bouquet we should not overlook the myrrh he tasted upon the Cross and that which was used to prepare him for burial. In the first he took upon himself the bitterness of our sins, and in the second he proclaimed the future incorruption of our bodies. *I shall publish the memory of the abundance of thy sweetness as long as I live; thy justifications and mercies I will never forget: for by them thou hast given me life* (Ps. 144:7; Ps. 118:93). I have said that wisdom is to be found in meditating on these things. They are for me the source of perfect righteousness, fullness of knowledge, the riches of salvation, and an abundance of merit. Sometimes I take from them a bitter but healing tonic; at other times, a sweet and consoling ointment. These events support me in times of trial and humble me in times of prosperity. They offer sure guidance to one who travels on the King's way among the joys and sorrows of this life, warding off impending evils on every side. They draw to me the favor of the world's Judge who, despite his awesome powers, they describe as meek and humble; though he is beyond the reach of princes and fearful to kings, they portray him as easily pleased and friendly. As you know, such thoughts are often in my mouth, and God knows that they are always in my heart—and it is clear that they are certainly no strangers to my pen. They express for me the most sublime philosophy: *to know . . . Jesus Christ, and him crucified* (1 Cor. 2:2). Dear friends, you must gather this prized bundle for yourselves. Recall that Simeon took him in his arms; that Mary bore him in her womb, cradled him on her lap, and like a bride placed him between her breasts. I imagine that Joseph dandled him on his knees and smiled often at him. All these people kept Christ before them, and nothing behind them. They are your models; do as they did. If you carry him in such a way that your eyes can rest on him, it is certain that the sight of the Lord's sufferings will make your own much lighter."⁴⁹ Because most people give little thought to these matters, they tire quickly; if they reflected on them, they would not grow weary of doing good.

⁴⁹ PL 183:994B; *Serm. Cant.* 43.2–5.

Benefits of Meditating on the Life of Christ

The blessed virgin Cecilia was accustomed to read the life of Christ.⁵⁰ For among the many words in praise of her virtues and renown, it is said that she always carried a copy of the Gospels close to her heart. I understand this to mean that, from among the events of the life of Christ preserved in the Gospels, she had chosen the ones that most moved her, and she meditated on these day and night with a pure and undivided heart, giving them particular and fervent attention. When she finished reading, she would start again, pondering these deeds with sweet and gentle enjoyment and gathering them into her heart for conscientious consideration. I encourage you to do the same. Of all the many kinds of spiritual exercise, I believe this is the one that is the most necessary, the most beneficial, and the one that can lead you to the greatest heights. The life of our Lord Jesus Christ was perfect and blameless: you will find no better manual to help you deal with empty and passing delights, tribulation, adversity, vices, and the temptations of enemies. Through frequent and assiduous meditation on his life, the soul learns to know him, to love him, and to have confidence in him: in this way we can resolutely resist foolish and passing things, scorning them and treating them with contempt. It is clear that Saint Cecilia's heart was so filled with the life of Christ that there was no room for trivial concerns. As she processed in on her wedding day, surrounded by the many distracting ceremonies of such an occasion, her heart was steadfast: as the organ sounded, she sang to God alone: "*Let my heart be undefiled . . . that I may not be confounded*" (Ps. 118:80).

Meditation on Christ's life also fortifies us to face tribulation and adversity, so that we feel and fear them less. This is shown by the martyrs, as Bernard teaches: "Therefore she hears the words, '*My dove in the clefts of the rock,*' because all of her devotion is centered on the wounds of Christ, and she dwells there continually by constant meditation (Song 2:14). From them flows strength for martyrdom, from them comes immense trust in the Most High. Our gentle commander wants his loyal

⁵⁰ The following pages of Ludolph's Prologue incorporate almost the entire Preface of the *Meditationes vitae Christi*. The *Meditationes* had a profound impact both on spirituality and art in the late Middle Ages. Ludolph (or an intervening source) removed the explicitly Franciscan elements in the Preface and added patristic citations. Ludolph also relied on the *Meditationes* a great deal in the body of his work; its emphasis on the role of imagination in meditating on Christ's life is very important. See Isa Ragusa and Rosalie Green, *Meditations on the Life of Christ: An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), 1–5.

soldiers to lift up their faces and eyes to his wounds: they will strengthen their resolve and teach them how to bear up more courageously. While gazing upon the Lord's wounds, they will not feel their own. The martyr leaps for joy and triumphs even as his whole body is being mangled and the sword slashes his sides; he watches the holy blood stream from his body not merely bravely, but gladly. Where is the martyr's soul at that moment? In a safe place, surely; in the rock, surely; in Christ's heart, surely; without doubt, the wounds are open to receive her. Had she been focusing only on her own heart, she would have felt the piercing steel and been unable to bear the pain; she would have given in and denied the faith. But now that he dwells in the rock, is it any wonder that he stands firm like a rock? Nor should we marvel that, exiled from the body, he does not feel bodily pains. Lack of feeling does not do this, love does; feelings are leashed, not lost; pain is not banished, but scorned. The martyr's strength comes from the rock."⁵¹

He made everything that we fear being deprived of worthless by depriving himself of it, and he overcame everything we are afraid to face by embracing it. Sin is simply wanting what he rejected or avoiding what he accepted.

Confessors of the faith and others also learn from Christ's life to not only put up with their labors, trials, and infirmities, but to do so cheerfully. By virtue of their loving meditation on the life and sufferings of Christ, their souls do not seem to be in their own bodies, but in Christ. One is prepared for the temptations and vices of the enemy, so that it is not possible to err about what to do or avoid: in Christ's life is found the perfection of all virtues. Nowhere can you find the instruction and examples of poverty, humility, charity, gentleness, obedience, patience, and the other virtues, to match the virtues in the life of Christ. Indeed, whatever virtues the Church possesses she has received from Christ himself, by means of the lessons of his deeds. [*The borrowing from the Meditationes vitæ Christi ends here.*]

Bernard asks: "What do you know about virtues if you are ignorant of Christ, who is the virtue of God? Where, I ask, is true prudence, except in Christ's teaching? Where is true justice, except in Christ's mercy? Where is true temperance, except in Christ's life? Where is true fortitude, except in Christ's Passion? Only those who have learned his

⁵¹ PL 183:1074A; *Serm. Cant.* 61.7–8.

doctrine can be called prudent; only those are just who have had their sins pardoned by his mercy; only those are temperate who strive to imitate his life; only those are courageous who firmly hold onto his lessons of wisdom and patience in trying times. You will labor in vain to acquire virtues if you hope to find them apart from the Lord of virtues, whose doctrine is the seedbed of prudence, whose mercy is the work of justice, whose life is the mirror of temperance, and whose death is an emblem of fortitude."⁵² Gregory the Great writes: "Why does the bride call her beloved, not myrrh, but a *bundle* of myrrh, unless it be that the holy soul, while devoutly pondering the life of Christ from every angle, is gathering together virtues of all sorts from him? By imitating these she can counter her faults and make for herself a bundle that prevents the everlasting putrefaction of the flesh."⁵³ And Augustine observes: "Although God heals souls in all sorts of ways through many gracious circumstances ordained by his marvelous wisdom, he has chosen none better than the Wisdom of God himself, that is, the only-begotten Son, con-

Whoever follows Christ cannot go astray or be deceived: by meditating frequently on his life, one's heart is refreshed, enkindled, and divinely illuminated to imitate and obtain his virtues.

substantial and coeternal with the Father, who deigned to take on our human nature completely: *And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us* (John 1:14). People were avidly seeking riches and paying court to selfish desires, and he chose to be poor; they coveted dignities and honors, and he refused to be made a king; they thought earthly progeny a great blessing, and he had no wife and family; they arrogantly shrank from insults, he bore every kind of outrage. They judged injustices to be intolerable, but what is a greater injustice than the condemnation of the just and innocent one? They viewed bodily punishment with horror, he was scourged and tortured in many ways. They were afraid to die, he was sentenced to death. They held crucifixion to be the most shameful way to perish, he was crucified. He made everything that we fear being deprived of worthless by depriving himself of it, and he overcame everything we are afraid to face by embracing it. Sin is simply wanting what he rejected or avoiding what he accepted."⁵⁴

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⁵² PL 183:883D; *Serm. Cant.* 22.11.

⁵³ PL 79:493A; Robert of Tombelaine (d. 1090), *Expositio in Cantica Cantorum*, 1,33.

⁵⁴ PL 34:134; *De vera Rel.* 16:30–31 (approximate).

So Christ's whole earthly life, which he chose to assume for us, offers instruction for our behavior. Again, Augustine writes: "We judge that people nowadays are not worthy of imitation. If you agree, apply your mind to the God who became Man to teach men and women how to live. Recall the words of John, *he that saith he abideth in him ought himself also to walk even as he walked*, and you will not lack someone to follow, because Christ's every action was done for our instruction (1 John 2:6). We encounter the same lesson again in the Lord's Passion: '*For I have given you an example, that as I have done to you, so you do also*'"⁵⁵ (John 13:15). Bede says: "Those who say that they abide in Christ should walk as he walked: they should not amass earthly goods or run after perishable wealth; they should flee honors and welcome contempt in this world for the sake of heavenly glory; they should help everyone gladly; they should injure no one and bear injuries from others patiently, even asking the Lord to pardon them; they should always seek the Creator's glory and never their own, and encourage their companions to pursue noble goals. To do things like this is what it means to follow in Christ's footsteps."⁵⁶ In the knowledge of Christ we possess salvation and all wisdom. As Ambrose writes, "We have all things in Christ, and Christ is everything to us. If you seek, someone to heal your wounds, he is a physician; if you are burning with fever, he is a fountain; if you are weighed down by iniquity, he is justice; if you need help, he is strength; if you fear death, he is life; if you shun the darkness, he is light; if you desire heaven, he is the way; if you hunger, he is food."⁵⁷ An old saying expresses this truth very well:

Not knowing Christ, our knowledge all is vain;
But knowing Christ—this knowledge is all gain.⁵⁸

Would that the worldly wise might understand, and so exchange their empty knowledge for this! Whoever follows Christ cannot go astray or be deceived: by meditating frequently on his life, one's heart

⁵⁵ PL 39:1547; *Sermo*. 351.4.11.

⁵⁶ PL 94:252A; Ps. Bede, *Hom.* 2.22, *In Nat. S. Matthæi*.

⁵⁷ PL 16:291C; *De Virg.* 16.99.

⁵⁸ *Hoc est nescire, sine Christo plurima scire; si Christum bene scis, satis est; si cetera, nescis*. The origin of this couplet is unknown, but it was popular from the Middle Ages on, sometimes being used as an epitaph. The idea can be traced back to Augustine's *Confessions*: "Surely someone is unhappy if he knows all these things, and does not know you; and the one who knows you is happy even if he knows nothing of these things" (*Conf.* V.4.7).

is refreshed, enkindled, and divinely illuminated to imitate and obtain his virtues. Indeed, many who are simple and illiterate have come to know great and profound mysteries of God because they have found here an anointing that gradually purifies and elevates the spirit, teaching all things. [*The preceding paragraph is taken from the Meditationes vitæ Christi.*]

In whatever concerns virtue and right conduct, always hold up before you that bright mirror and model of all holiness, the life and behavior of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God.⁵⁹ He was sent from Heaven for our sake, to blaze the trail of virtue, to give us by his example the law of life and discipline, and to instruct us in his person. We had been created in his image, but we defiled that image by sin; however, we can restore that image by imitating his virtues. The more you strive to conform yourself to him by following his example, the closer you will be to him in Heaven and the more of his glory you will share. [*This borrowing from David of Augsburg ends here.*]

How to Meditate on the Life of Christ

As Christ's faithful follower, examine in turn each period in Christ's life, study all his virtues, and seek to imitate them to the best of your ability. In your exterior and interior efforts, call to mind Christ's hardships and labors; if you are heavily burdened, run to him, the gentle father of the poor, and throw yourself upon him like a child in her mother's lap. Tell him everything, entrust everything to him, cast all your cares upon him; he will calm the storm and relieve you. Do not simply yearn for the Lord Jesus when you keep vigil, but as you lie on your bed lay your head on its resting-place and imagine yourself reclining with John on Jesus' breast; and as you recline, nurse at that breast and you will peacefully slumber and rest in him. [*What follows is from David of Augsburg:*] In everything you say and do, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus as your model: walking and standing, sitting and getting up, eating

⁵⁹Ludolph (or an intervening source) interpolates several passages from the *De exterioris et interioris hominis* by David of Augsburg (d. 1272) into his citations from the *Meditationes*. This work, too, was often attributed to Bonaventure. David presents Christ as an exemplar of virtues. Although Ludolph does not identify his sources, his Prologue consists almost entirely of excerpts from three works, and this combination shapes his characteristic approach to meditating on the life of Christ: from Guigo, meditation as a path to contemplation; from the *Meditationes*, the role of the senses and imagination; from David, the moral implications of Christ's behavior. See David of Augsburg, *Spiritual Life and Progress*, trans. D. Devas (London:Burns & Oates, 1937), 1:21–23.

and drinking, speaking and keeping silence, alone or with others. In this way, you will grow to love him more, familiarity with him will increase your faith and grace, and you will become more perfect in virtue.

Let this be your wisdom and your purpose: to always be thinking somehow about Jesus, so that you are striving to imitate him more closely or love him more deeply. You will use your time well by meditating on these subjects and devoting yourself to good and holy reflections about the Lord Jesus. By continually thinking about him, *[this borrowing from David of Augsburg ends here.]* the mirror and model of all perfection, you will change your behavior to resemble his as you go about your business. The more frequently you engage in these meditations, the more familiar they will become to you: they will come into your mind more spontaneously and refresh your spirit more delightfully.

[A borrowing from David of Augsburg:] You have seen to what an eminent position meditation on Christ's life leads. Now I would like to say something about the meditations themselves; I will not treat everything written in the Gospels, but will pick out the more important events. Nor should you think that everything Jesus said and did, and upon which we can meditate, was written down. In order to make a greater impression on you, I will describe events as they occurred, or might have occurred, employing imaginative representations that strike the mind in different ways. For we can consider, understand, and express the meaning of Sacred Scripture in as many ways as we find helpful, provided they are not contrary to the truth of life, justice, or doctrine; in other words, so long as they are not contrary to faith and morals. However, if someone asserts something about God that seems unreliable to you because it is not in accord with natural reason, the moral law, faith, or Sacred Scripture, he sins by presumption. So, you will find me saying the Lord Jesus, or other persons, said or did something; if this cannot be demonstrated from Scripture, you should consider what I say to be no more than a devout reflection. That is, take it as if I had said, "Imagine the good Lord Jesus as he says this, or does that," and so with the other characters. If you want to gain the greatest benefit from this exercise, put aside all other concerns and tasks, and with your whole heart strive with diligence, delight, and de-

Although these accounts describe events that occurred in the past, you must meditate upon them as if they were taking place now: there is no question but that you will savor them with greater pleasure.

termination to be present when Jesus speaks and acts. As you read the narrative, imagine you are seeing each event with your own eyes and hearing it with your own ears, because the sweetest thoughts are born of desire—and these are much more pleasing to the taste. [*This borrowing from David of Augsburg ends here.*] Although these accounts describe events that occurred in the past, you must meditate upon them as if they were taking place now: there is no question but that you will savor them with greater pleasure. Read what once happened as if it were happening here and now. Put past deeds before your eyes as if they were present; you will experience them more discreetly and more happily.

This is why sometimes I describe the locations where events took place: when we read in the Gospel that this or that action happened in a certain place, it is very helpful to know something about where it occurred. Christian churches all over the world never cease to unite themselves day and night with the Holy Land where the good Jesus lived, which he illuminated by his preaching and consecrated by his Precious Blood. We find it pleasing to think about these places. But it would be even more delightful to see them in person, and there to ponder in our hearts how the Lord labored for our salvation in each different locale. Who can describe how the many devout pilgrims in the Holy Land travel from site to site, and with burning zeal kiss the ground and embrace the places where they hear that Jesus sat or performed some deed? Beating their breasts, weeping, groaning, and sighing by turns, they express outwardly in their bodies the devotion they doubtless feel in their hearts, and their emotion moves many to tears, even among the Saracens. What shall I say about the patriarch Jacob, or about Joseph and his brothers, who, although they could not dwell there in their lifetime, chose to be buried there after they died? What more? Well might we weep over the indifference of the Christian people in our time, who in spite of so many examples are slow to deliver the land Jesus Christ hallowed with his blood from the hands of the enemy.⁶⁰

Take it as a general rule that wherever you do not find material for reflection in following a narrative, it suffices to picture in your mind's eye something the Lord Jesus said or did, and simply talk with him so that you might become more familiar with him. For it seems that greater sweetness and more devotion is to be had in this way; in fact, almost

⁶⁰This paragraph is taken from the *Descriptio terræ sanctæ*, written by Burchard of Mount Sion around the year 1285. Ludolph occasionally draws on this source, but he also describes monuments in the Holy Land that do not appear in Burchard's book.

all the efficacy of these reflections consists in always and everywhere attentively contemplating the deeds and behavior of Jesus. Picture him among his disciples and in the company of sinners; when he converses and preaches; when he walks and when he sits; when he sleeps and when he keeps vigil; when he eats and when he serves others; when he heals the sick and when he performs other miracles. [*What follows is from David of Augsburg:*] Ponder in your heart his conduct and his actions: how humbly he carried himself among the people and how gently he dealt with his disciples; how merciful he was to the poor, making himself like them in everything so that they seemed to be his special kin; how he despised or spurned no one, even the lepers; how he did not curry favor with the wealthy; how free he was of worldly cares, giving no thought to his bodily needs; how patient he was in the face of insults, and how meekly he responded to them; how he did not defend himself with biting and bitter retorts, but instead countered malicious words with a humble response. Observe how suitably he acted in all things and how concerned he was for the salvation of souls, out of love for whom he was willing to die; how he made himself an example of all goodness; how compassionate he was with the afflicted; how he patiently bore with the imperfections of the sick and did not scorn sinners; how mercifully he welcomed the penitent, how obedient he was to his parents, and how promptly he served the needs of all. As he himself said, "*I am in the midst of you, as he that serveth*" (Luke 22:27). See how he shunned all boasting and ostentation, and avoided giving any cause for scandal; how sparingly he ate and drank; how modest he was in appearance, how dedicated to prayer, how attentive at vigils, how willing to endure labor and want; and how calm he remained in all circumstances. Similarly, as you hear or read about what Jesus said and did, meditate on the way in which he did everything, or might have done it in your estimation, because he who was the best and most perfect of men always acted in the best and most perfect way. [*This borrowing from David of Augsburg ends here.*]

Jesus had a pleasing appearance, a gentle way of speaking, and was kind in all he did. Above all contemplate his face, if you can picture it; this is probably the most difficult thing to do, but is also perhaps the most pleasing.

What Jesus Looked Like

Jesus had a pleasing appearance, a gentle way of speaking, and was kind in all he did. Above all contemplate his face, if you can picture it; this is probably the most difficult thing to do, but is also perhaps the most pleasing. Let his countenance instruct you, and have recourse to it in the narratives that follow. If individual meditations are unclear or subjects for consideration are lacking, hasten back to picturing him and it will suffice for you as regards what is written here. To help you see Christ's face and appearance, or indeed his complete figure, I would like to include something that you may find useful while meditating on the narrative of his deeds. It is said that the following appears in annals of the Romans: "Jesus Christ is proclaimed to be a prophet of truth by the people. He is rather tall, with a venerable countenance that inspires either love or fear. His hair is the color of a ripe hazelnut; it hangs down straight to his ears, but below the ears it is wavy and curly, with a bluish sheen, and fans out on his shoulders. It is parted in two at the top of his head, as is customary for Nazarenes. His brow is smooth and very serene, his face without spot or wrinkle, with a slightly ruddy complexion. His nose and mouth are faultless. His beard is full and youthful, of the same color of his hair, not long, but forked at the chin. His aspect is grave and mature, his bluish-gray eyes changeable and bright. He is formidable when reprimanding, sweet and amiable when teaching, and cheerful without losing his dignity. He sometimes weeps, but never laughs. His stature is well developed and straight, and his hands and arms are beautiful to behold. His conversation is serious, reasonable, sparing, and modest."⁶¹ According to the description just given, he truly deserves to be called by the Psalmist "*beautiful above the sons of men*" (Ps. 44:3).

The Excellence of the Gospels

According to Augustine, among the entire collection of divine records contained in Sacred Scripture, pride of place should be given to

⁶¹This description was probably written in Italy in the thirteenth or fourteenth century, but purports to be a contemporary description of Jesus' appearance. The Byzantine historian Nicephorus Callistus (d. 1335) has a similar description, so it is possible that the Latin version was a translation from the Greek. Although Ludolph simply refers to it as a document from the annals of the Romans, it later came to be described as a letter from Publius Lentulus, governor of Judea prior to Pontius Pilate. (No such person existed, nor was there a "governor of Judea.") In 1440 Lorenzo Valla dismissed the letter as a forgery. Its first appearance in a printed book was in an edition of the *Vita Christi* printed in 1474.

the Gospels.⁶² For this reason, see to it that you always hold them in your hands and carry them in your heart: they will best illuminate for you the life and deeds of our Lord Jesus Christ, and all that pertains to your salvation. Chrysostom teaches that the Gospels provide a summary of the perfections of our rational nature, and Jerome claims that in them we find the complete fulfillment of the Law and a digest of precepts and examples for life.⁶³ Chrysostom writes: "It would be wonderful if we had no need for the Scriptures, because by the grace of the Spirit we were living rightly, simply because the Spirit has written in our hearts the same doctrine recorded with ink on paper. But, since we have lost the grace to act in this way, and also to help us anticipate future blessings, we should attend to what has been written down."⁶⁴ The Scriptures were not given to us simply for us to preserve them in books, but so that we could engrave them on our hearts. For if the devil will not dare to approach a house in which the Gospels are kept, much less will he, or any demons, or any sinful nature, ever touch or enter a soul that bears about with it the ideas contained in the Gospels.

Their intention was simply to record the Gospel story in the most beneficial way; as Augustine suggests, it is likely that each of the Evangelists was careful to record the story in exactly the way God had inspired him.

Sanctify your soul, sanctify your body, by always having the words of the Gospels on your lips and in your heart. Just as foul language soils us and opens the door to demons, so it is evident that spiritual reading sanctifies us and draws down divine grace upon us."⁶⁵ Beloved, let us devote ourselves to the Scriptures. If nothing else, let us assiduously study the Gospels and have them always at hand. Once you open these books, provided you keep on to the end, you will hold worldly preoccupations in contempt and reject them. If you are wealthy, you will account riches as nothing; if you are poor, your poverty will not ruin you; you will not be grasping or avaricious. In fact, you will be greedy for more poverty and despise riches. If you act in this way, you will ban-

⁶² PL 34:1042; *De cons. Ev.* 1.1.

⁶³ Chrysostom: PG 57/58:20; *Hom. Mt.* 1.12; Ps. Jerome: PL 68:413D; Primasius of Hadrumetum (d. 560), *Com. in Epist. S. Pauli*, Preface.

⁶⁴ PG 57:15; *Hom. Mt.* 1.2.

⁶⁵ PG 59:187; *Hom. Io.* 32.3.

ish all wickedness. Many other benefits are to be gained, too many to be enumerated here; those who follow my counsel will learn them by experience.

Elsewhere Chrysostom says: "What equals the Gospels in excellence? God himself descends to speak to us on earth, and mortals are raised up to Heaven; human beings converse with angels and the other supernal powers. By virtue of the Gospel, the ancient struggle is concluded: demons flee, death is destroyed, paradise is opened, the curse is broken, sin is banished, error is repelled, truth returns, the word of mercy is sowed everywhere and everywhere springs up, heavenly powers speak with us as friends, angels make frequent visitations to earth. In all of this, our assurance regarding the certainty of all future blessings is strengthened. For this reason, the Gospels alone should truly be called 'Good News,' because all other words are empty, promising good things only in this present life. That message first proclaimed by the fishermen can rightly be described as good tidings, since it was freely and generously given to us. We have received these tremendous promises, not by the sweat of our brow, or hard work, or great torment, but simply because of God's great love for us."⁶⁶ And Augustine explains: "The word 'Gospel' is rendered in Latin as 'good message' or 'good proclamation.' The word can be used for any good news, but is properly applied to the announcement of the Savior. Therefore, those who narrated the birth, words, and deeds of Our Lord Jesus Christ are called 'Evangelists.'"⁶⁷

Before beginning to read the Gospel stories themselves, you should note that each of the Evangelists, guided by the Holy Spirit, sometimes anticipated events that came later, or recorded events omitted in earlier accounts, or repeated events related elsewhere to improve their narrative. Their intention was simply to record the Gospel story in the most beneficial way; as Augustine suggests, it is likely that each of the Evangelists was careful to record the story in exactly the way God had inspired him.⁶⁸ Lest the devotion of the novice be unduly troubled, in this presentation I have laid out the sequence of events in a way that fidelity to the course of events seemed to require. This does not mean that what follows is necessarily the actual, certain order in which these events took place, because such a definitive presentation is not possible.

⁶⁶ PG 57:15; *Hom. Mt.* 1.3.

⁶⁷ PL 42:210; *Contra Faust.* 2.2.

⁶⁸ PL 34:1044; *De Cons. Ev.* 1.2.

Be that as it may, in the Gospels themselves you will learn the life story of the Word Incarnate, what he commands and what he promises, in which you have the way, the truth, and the life. Study carefully Christ’s example: from his life, you will see that you *can* live rightly; from his commandments, you will know *how* to live rightly; from his promises, you will *desire* to live rightly. With these three weapons you can repel our three enemies—impotence, ignorance, negligence. The one who chooses to remain ignorant will be ignored, the negligent person will be neglected, the one who feigns inability will be cast out.

So rouse yourself, O soul devoted to Christ! Be alert, Christian! Examine diligently, ponder attentively, tease out scrupulously every detail in the life of Jesus Christ, and follow in your Lord’s footsteps.⁶⁹ For your sake he came down to earth from his heavenly throne; for your own sake, flee earthly things and strive for those of Heaven. If you find that the world is sweet, know that Christ is sweeter; if you find that the world is harsh, know that he endured all its pains for you. Arise and walk! Do not drag your feet on the path, lest you forfeit your place in your homeland.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, grant that I, a poor and weak sinner, may keep the eyes of my heart fixed on your life and deeds, and imitate you to the best of my ability. By this means enable me to attain perfect maturity and become a holy temple of the Lord. Shed upon my heart the light of your grace: may it continually precede me and follow me so that, with you as my leader in all my ways, I may do all those things that are pleasing to you, and avoid those that displease you. O Most High, I beseech you to direct all my thoughts, words, and deeds according to your law and your counsels; by doing your will in all things, may I deserve to be saved by you here and for all eternity. Amen.

⁶⁹This final paragraph cites and expands on the final paragraph in the Prologue to Bonaventure’s *Lignum vitæ*.

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