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For Christians, the path leading to holiness is marked out by Jesus Christ and his example of faithful obedience to God’s will and dedicated service to spreading the divine reign in the world. The Christian life is empowered and guided by the example of the historical Jesus and the mediation of the risen Christ. We grow spiritually by deepening our personal relationship to Christ and strengthening our commitment to follow his teachings. In his Apostolic Exhortation, “On the Call to Holiness in Today’s World,” Pope Francis emphasizes the centrality of our relationship to Christ: “At its core, holiness is experiencing, in union with Christ, the mysteries of his life. It consists in uniting ourselves to the Lord’s death and resurrection in a unique and personal way, constantly dying and rising anew with him” (n20). According to the pope, an integrated Christian spirituality has a paschal character, meaning it includes participation in both the death and the resurrection of Christ. Our path to holiness is marked by liturgical celebrations of both Good Friday and Easter Sunday that unite us with the crucified and risen Christ. On a daily basis, we have opportunities to die and rise with Christ by following his command to love our neighbor.

Francis also encourages us to reproduce in our own lives “various aspects of Jesus’s earthly life: his hidden life, his life in community, his closeness to the outcast, his poverty and other ways in which he showed his self-sacrificing love” (ibid). The pope wants us to reflect on the historical Jesus portrayed in the Gospels and to follow his example in our daily lives. We are called to put on the mind of Christ so that we tend to see the world through eyes of faith illumined by him and are committed to practice his command to love our neighbor. Jesus Christ is our path to holiness and our way to greater spiritual maturity.

The German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904-1984) can serve as an example of an intellectually solid and personally integrated spirituality centered on the historical Jesus and risen Christ. Karl was born March 5, 1904, in Freiburg, the middle child of seven in a devout Catholic family. He joined the Society of Jesus in 1922 and was ordained in 1932; studied at various universities, including Freiburg, where he encountered the philosopher Martin Heidegger; spent his life teaching, lecturing and writing in an effort to make the Catholic tradition relevant for contemporary life; served as an influential theological consultant at the Second Vatican Council and continued to write on current issues until shortly before his death in 1984.

Rahner was convinced that many Christians have trouble identifying with Christ because they do not really accept his true humanity. Some have a strong belief in the divinity of Christ, who is “true God from True God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father,” as we proclaim at Mass. However, they have more trouble accepting that Jesus experienced genuine human reactions; for example, had conflicts with his parents, got angry, knew disappointment, wept over the death of a friend, did not know when the end of the world was coming and felt abandoned by God.

Traditional theology, based on John’s Gospel, started with the conviction that the eternal Word of God descended from heaven to become man and save us from our sins. It went on to portray Jesus as the exalted Son of God, the Creator of all things, the Source of truth, images that highlight the divinity of Christ. To gain a more balanced outlook, Rahner developed an ascending Christology that begins with the human Jesus portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels, who grew in wisdom, age and grace before God and man. For Rahner, Jesus was so open to God, so obedient to the Father’s will and so filled with divine grace that we can confess him as Son of God, God personally present in our world, the definitive prophet and absolute savior, the fulness of divine revelation. As true man and true God, Jesus Christ is our model of holiness and our guide to spiritual maturity. We can identify with him as our brother and friend because he was like us in all things but sin. We can have a personal relationship with him because, as the risen Lord, he remains present to us in all our everyday activities, in our liturgical celebrations and in the needy we encounter.

Not only did Rahner encourage us to imitate Christ, he also gave many concrete examples of how the Gospel stories of Jesus can guide our spiritual quest. For example, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, told six times in the Gospels, teaches us to put an emphasis not on what we do not have, as did the disciples in the story, but on what we do have, as did Jesus, who made good use of limited resources. The story of the twelve-year-old Jesus remaining behind in the Jerusalem Temple reminds us that conflicts are inevitable in family life, and that they can occur without anyone actually being at fault, as was the case with the holy family. As these examples suggest, the Gospel stories are a rich resource for finding our way on the path to holiness. Christ is present in the proclamation of the Gospel at Mass, with a personal message of enlightenment and encouragement for each one of us. Private prayer prepares us to take those liturgical messages to heart so they illumine and energize our spiritual journey.

As a dedicated Jesuit, Rahner’s own spirituality was grounded in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius, which invites imaginative meditation on Gospel scenes. A chronological examination of Rahner’s vast writings suggests that over time his own spirituality became more heartfelt, more emotional, more centered on a loving, personal relationship with Christ. As a young man, he spoke rather soberly about his commitment to Christ. It was only later in life, as he himself tells it, that he could speak comfortably about “throwing his arms around Jesus in an act of love.” The very fact that a great theologian continued to grow in his relationship with Christ encourages us to look for ways to deepen our own dedication to the Lord who promises us a more abundant life.

As Pope Francis reminds us, we can find inspiration not only from well-known persons but also from holy people who do not gain much public recognition. Junia grew up in a loving Catholic family, went to parochial schools and married a man she met in the Newman Club in college. She liked being a mother to her four children and is proud of them, although disappointed that two of them no longer go to Church. Now in her early 60s, she continues to enjoy time with her grandchildren and her challenging job with an advertising agency.

For most of her adult life, Junia practiced a traditional form of devotional Catholicism. She went to Mass regularly, highlighted by receiving Christ her God in communion. She had a deep devotion to Mary and said at least a decade of the rosary most days. She thought of Mary as her guide to living the Christian life, turning to her in challenging times: for example, when upset with her husband, fatigued with the demands of motherhood, and frustrated with her job. Praying to Mary brought a degree of comfort, a sense that a saintly woman who understood her problems was with her in the struggle. When Junia’s younger brother died at an early age, she found solace in imagining Mary holding her crucified son in her arms.

When Junia was in her mid-50s, she attended a lecture sponsored by her parish on Jesus our brother and friend, which put in a popular form Karl Rahner’s ideas on appreciating the humanity of Christ and following his example portrayed in the Gospels. It proved to be the beginning of a process that over time enriched her spirituality. While maintaining her devotion to Mary, she now sees Christ as her primary guide to holiness. Without being able to articulate it clearly, she has an intuitive sense that Christ understands her struggles and walks with her on her spiritual journey. She sees him as a close friend who is always there for her. She is now in the habit of listening carefully to the Gospel proclaimed at Mass, looking for a message she can apply to her everyday life. In her private prayers, she talks to Jesus in her own words, thanking him for blessings, praising him for his goodness, and asking him to forgive her sins.

As we try to deepen and expand our own relationship to Christ, it is helpful to find images and language that fit our personality and stage of spiritual development. Some of us may not be comfortable with Rahner’s notion of throwing our arms around Jesus as a loving gesture or Junia’s language of intimate friendship. There are many other constructive ways of imaging Christ: for example, the ethical teacher who keeps us heading in the right direction; the definitive prophet who speaks God’s word to us; the absolute savior who forgives our sins and always gives us another chance; the liberator of captives who encourages us to work for justice and peace; the cosmic Lord who invites us to care for own common home.

It is crucial for our spiritual growth to deepen our personal relationship with Christ. This enables us to see him as the supreme model of holiness and the primary guide on our spiritual journey. It also prompts us to pray to him in words that are familiar and authentic.