

# Saints *Alive!*

A Periodic Newsletter of Emmaus Journey

Issue  
29

## Putting Christ First: Motivated by Who Jesus Is

By Rich Cleveland

*“The Lord of all life ordained that we live and learn within the family of God, so perhaps the first step in putting Christ first is to turn to a discipleship formation leader and ask for help.”*

**W**hen we first hear the admonition to put Christ first, we understand it to be a challenge to live our life for him and to make our decisions based on what is best for him and his kingdom. However, the concept subconsciously suggests that we, by our will, in some way affect or influence his rightful position. However, upon further thought we come to realize that we don’t “put” Christ first (“cause to happen, or to be”<sup>1</sup>), rather we simply come to the understanding that he is first—he is preeminent in, and over, all. Though to some degree our response is always inadequate and incomplete in regard to what Jesus deserves, but as a Christian, upon realizing who he is we simply desire, and consequently decide, to adhere to this wonderful reality. Putting Christ first is the result of an ever-increasing comprehension of who Jesus is, and our response to love and serve him in all aspects of our life stemming from a deep sense of gratitude and awe.

Conversely the degree to which we do not live for him is usually a reflection of our ignorance regarding who he truly is and of what his preeminence consists. Let us begin by briefly reflecting on what Scripture attests. Rather than try to “improve on perfection”, think with me on the following passage from Colossians 1:15–20, paying attention specifically to the “first-ness” of Jesus. (To help expand our thinking the passage is given here in the Amplified Version.<sup>2</sup>)

<sup>15</sup>“He is **the exact living image** [the essential manifestation] **of the unseen God** [the

visible representation of the invisible],

**the firstborn** [the preeminent one, the sovereign, and the originator] **of all creation**.<sup>16</sup> For by Him all things were created in heaven and on earth, [things] visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities; **all things were created and exist through Him** [that is, by His activity] **and for Him**.

<sup>17</sup> And He Himself **existed and is before all things**, and **in Him all things hold together**. [His is the controlling, cohesive force of the universe.]

<sup>18</sup> He is also **the head** [the life-source and leader] **of the body, the church;**

and He is **the beginning, the firstborn from the dead**, so that He Himself **will occupy the first place** [He will stand supreme and be preeminent] in everything.

<sup>19</sup> For it pleased the *Father* **for all the fullness** [of deity—the sum total of His essence, all His perfection, powers, and attributes] **to dwell [permanently] in Him** (the Son),

<sup>20</sup> and through [the intervention of] the Son **to reconcile all things** to Himself, making peace [with believers] through the blood of His cross; through Him, [I say,] whether things on earth or things in heaven.”<sup>3</sup>

### Inside this Issue

- From the Heart
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- Excerpt from *The Catholic Topical Memory System*

1. Definition from *Wordweb*.

2. The Amplified Bible is produced by a joint effort of Zondervin and the Lockman Foundation “It is designed to ‘amplify’ the text by using additional wording and a system of punctuation and other typographical features to bring out all shades of meaning present in the original texts” as explained in [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amplified\\_Bible](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amplified_Bible).

3. All Scripture used in this article comes from <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Colossians+1&version=AMP>

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*I now recognize that the safest place for me is in the middle of God's plan, not in the middle of conditions the world considers "safe".*

## Emmaus Journey

### MISSION:

Emmaus Journey is a lay Catholic evangelization and discipleship ministry which partners with parishes, small groups and individuals to facilitate a personal encounter with and conversion to Christ, thereby forming missionary disciples actively living for Jesus.

### VISION:

By encountering Christ through scripture, discipleship and community—individuals experience: 1) conversion to Christ; 2) transformation in Christ; and 3) mobilization for Christ, where they are actively involved in sharing their faith with others and living out their faith in the greater community. Thus achieving Goal One of the USCCB's initiative on evangelization, "To bring about in all Catholics such an enthusiasm for their faith that, in living their faith in Jesus, they freely share it with others."



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## From the Heart By Mike Dill

*"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33 NIV)*

In 2010, God began to call me to leave my secure job with the Army and serve him full-time as a lay evangelist. However, I hesitated to obey that calling, because I was anxious about how God would provide for me or for any future family. So like the prophet Jonah, instead of faithfully going the way God was calling me to, I ran the other way. I stayed in the Army and spent time considering all sorts of other options of "more secure" career paths.

This "career analysis" went on for several years, and it coincided with a time of great mental instability. When my work was going well and my life was padded with enough positive circumstances, I felt happy. But when work wasn't going well and circumstances weren't favorable, I collapsed very quickly into a debilitating state of anxiety and depression, unlike anything I had ever experienced before God called me to mission work.

I sought help in so many places, but ultimately, the Lord himself answered my cry for help. While good advice, breathing techniques, talk therapy, and medication helped mask the pain a bit, I experienced true healing of mind and body when I said "yes" to God. In the summer of 2014, I put his kingdom first by leaving the active Army to train as a brand new missionary. Even though I was bereft of a salary then, that's when I began experiencing lasting healing of mind and body.

Asking the Lord to bring about supporters was the most difficult professional undertaking of my life, but the Lord fulfilled his promise in Matthew 6:33 by moving enough people to generously partner with us in mission until our material needs were met as an Emmaus Journey missionary family.

Looking back on those years of pain, I understand those experiences of mental disease were the fruit of my fundamental distrust of God. I now recognize that the safest place for me is in the middle of God's plan, not in the middle of conditions the world considers "safe". I learned that pursuing money for security is equivalent to pursuing money out of insecurity, and living out of insecurity causes all sorts of misery.

"Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23 NIV)

Sometimes, **putting Christ first** may require us to alter our careers. At other times, and more commonly, it will merely require us to alter our plans for the day. I find an even greater danger lies hidden in the moments when Christ calls me to smaller sacrifices. When I ignore the little prompting to put down my phone and engage with my loved ones, or to get up and do the dishes even though I'm tired, I deviate from the path Christ would have me follow, and there's very little alarm to tell me so. Over time, these unnoticeable deviations add up and can cause irreversible damage to my relationships.

Conversely, if I put Christ first in the little moments, not only do I find the strength to pick up my cross, but by doing so, I also find the joy of the fulfillment of my deepest desires.

Recently I was invited to get breakfast with a young man. Even though my schedule was packed and I had other priorities pressing me, I felt like I should say "yes" to him, so I did—a small sacrifice. This young man's gifts, thoughts, and fears were so similar to my own, that I felt as though I had been given a chance to travel back in time to 2010 and give counsel to a younger version of myself. He was having a "quarter-life crisis" similar to the one I described in this article. God alone knew how he would use the mess of my past life, the "yes" I finally gave him, and my small "yes" to that breakfast that morning to testify and speak hope in such a critical time of another man's life. The joy of putting Christ first is available to us even if we have a history of missing out on that joy.



Mike Dill

*Mike Dill and his wife Rachel are Emmaus Journey staff. The Dills have three children. As Emmaus Journey staff, Mike seeks to catalyze evangelization and discipleship through Catholic communities. Mike also serves as a major in the United States Army Reserves. They live in Colorado Springs, Colorado and are members of Holy Apostles Catholic Church.*

## Tools You Can Use

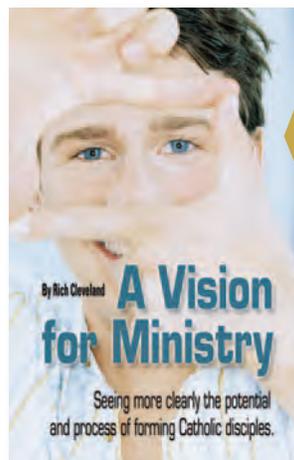
# Affecting Change Through Effective Leaders

The key to having a motivating and effective Scripture based small-group formation program is to have leaders who know what they are doing and why they are doing it. Often when a good beginning, based on good materials slowly dies out, it is because the leaders have lost sight of the purpose (or perhaps never really understood it) and failed to model the results intended. The following two resources help train leaders to understand the objective and process for laity's ministry to others, and provide some important practical insights on how to lead well.

*"Whatever model is used, adult faith formation should always actively challenge participants to get involved with their own faith journey—passive listening is never enough; the goal is always conversion."*<sup>4</sup>

*"Small communities are powerful vehicles for adult faith formation, providing opportunities for learning, prayer, mutual support, and the shared experience of Christian living and service to Church and society."*<sup>5</sup>

**Sound interesting?** You can order your copies today by clicking [here](#).



*A Vision for Ministry: Seeing more clearly the potential and process of forming Catholic disciples, is a training resource designed to help leaders and leadership teams rethink their vision and direction.*

*A Facilitator's Guide: Practical training for leading lively and informative small-group discussions is a helpful tool to enable small-group facilitators to effectively lead small-groups. Life is tough, but leading a small-group doesn't have to be.*



4. *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us, A Pastoral Plan for Adult Formation in the United States*, by USCCB, 81

5. Ibid 106

## Topic: Putting Christ First

Verses: **Matthew 6:33** and **Luke 9:23**

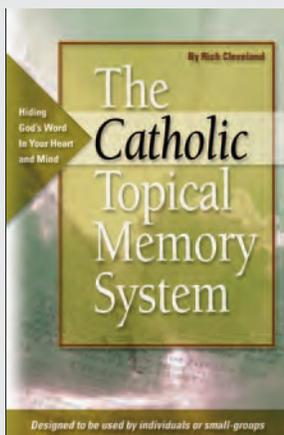
### Reflection on the Wisdom of the Church

There is no sadder person nor sadder Christian than the one who has decided to only go half-way with Christ. Partial commitment to Christ prevents a person from being able to enjoy the world or enjoy being a Christian. Guilt and remorse follows their excursions into worldliness and sin, and when they are back among whole-hearted followers of Christ, they are racked with remorse and guilt as they compare what they are with what they could be.

For the Christian, the way to happiness and fulfillment leads directly to the cross. Jesus said, “Whoever would save their life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it.”

*“The full readiness to change – which might even be better termed readiness to become another man – is present in him only who, having heard the call ‘Follow me’ from the mouth of the Lord, follows Him as did the Apostles, leaving everything behind’... He is merely required to relinquish his old self, the natural foundation, and all purely natural standards, and open himself entirely to Christ’s action.”...*

Saint Paul raises the issue of sin’s continuing dominance over our lives in the face of our having received mercy and grace (Romans 7). He explains that sin should no longer have dominance over us and that the choice is ours. We can either “yield [our] members to sin as instruments of wickedness” or “yield [ourselves] to God as men (and women) who have been brought from death to life, and [our] members to God as instruments of righteousness.” This is what is meant by putting God first.



### Questions for Meditation

#### Matthew 6:33

(For context read Lamentations Matthew 6:25–34)

- In the passage, what are some of the things that might prevent a person from putting Christ first in his life?
- Which issues of life are most likely to hinder you from putting Christ first in your life?
- How would you define *righteousness* and the *Kingdom of God*? (You may want to use a standard dictionary, a Bible dictionary or Bible encyclopedia to help define these terms.)

#### Luke 9:23

(For context read Luke 9:18–27)

- From this passage what seems to be the greatest hindrance to following Christ?
- How does this passage reflect the freedom of choice which the Lord gives us in deciding to follow him?
- What does Jesus mean by “take up your cross”?
- To what extent does our answer to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say I am?” affect our willingness to follow Christ?

### Order Your Copy

*The Catholic Topical Memory System* is available through Emmaus Journey’s Bookstore.

Order your copy by clicking [here](#).

1. *Transformation in Christ*, by Dietrich Von Hildebrand, page 8

## Putting Christ First: Motivated by Who Jesus Is

*continued from front page*

*“I would suggest that you don’t do this primarily by passively listening to someone else’s experience and explanation of God, rather it involves you yourself thinking on Scripture and digesting it in such a way that you can explain it in your own words, and incorporate its truth into your actions and attitudes.”*

The reasons he is, and should be considered first in our lives are manifold, especially when reading through this expanded explanation, consequently it should motivate us to frequently pause and meditate on these attributes of Jesus. **This is who he IS**, and gives us just an inkling of the glory which IS his now; the glory which he did not begrudge laying aside to become a man, so that he might become our Savior. As the Colossians passage goes on to say, <sup>21</sup>“although you were at one time estranged *and* alienated and hostile-minded [toward Him], participating in evil things, <sup>22</sup>**yet Christ has now reconciled you** [to God] in His physical body through death, in order to present you before the Father holy and blameless and beyond reproach...” If while acknowledging these things to be true, it does not evoke a consciousness of gratitude within our being, and initiate an impulse to live for him, it should disturb us.

Upon reading and meditating on these and other passages about Jesus’ primacy, *putting Christ first* immediately makes sense and does evoke a desire within us to live more devotedly to, and for him. It is when we get down into the nitty-gritty of everyday life that our resolve is often tested. When we selfishly revert to living for our own pleasures and according to our own will, we later, during a time of reflection often wonder “how” to consistently put Christ first. Jim Downing, a friend and mission leader once used a helpful metaphor. He pointed out that deep hillside erosion is caused by water running down the same little paths each time it rains until eventually deepening grooves are formed. He pointed out that if you are not satisfied with the way the erosion is affecting a hillside then you must redirect the rainwater to run in a different path. Similarly, our behavior and attitudes are affected by the habitual ways we think; those little habitual, mental and spiritual rivulets that have developed in our mind/heart shaping our affections—often having destructive and negative effects. When these rivulets of our mind and affections are not running in paths that acknowledge Jesus’ sovereignty and preeminence they then need to be redirected. In addition to damming up the destructive thinking and affections, we need to allow the development of new rivulets

to be constructed which are consistent with Jesus’ character and desires.

So many of us go from one experience of deep repentance and rededication to the next, while periodically suffering defeat during the in-between times. We are to be commended for getting up and starting over again once falling and failing, but we need to realize that what is needed is not one more experience of repentance and rededication, more ardent than the last—rather a change of daily orientation. St. Paul, refers to this process as putting off the old nature and **putting on the new nature which IS ours in Christ**. Where the process often breaks down for most of us is that we don’t endeavor to redirect the rivulets or daily habits of our mind/heart so that we can replace the old ways of thinking by developing new habits that open our mind/heart to the *Living Water of the Holy Spirit’s* influence. Putting on the new nature takes place through processes similar to what we just did—opening ourselves to Christ by meditating on holy Scripture, spending time with Jesus in prayer, and learning with other disciples who are on a similar journey. As Catholics we can do this in many ways, by being part of a small-group bible study, adoration, daily or frequent attendance at mass beyond our weekly obligation, reading Scripture and praying daily, etc. For now, we cannot list all the ways one can spend time listening to and talking with Jesus, but the point is that if you want to change the pathways of your mind/heart you must actively open them to new paths of intake of Living Water. I would suggest that you don’t do this primarily by passively listening to someone else’s experience and explanation of God, rather it involves you yourself thinking on Scripture and digesting it in such a way that you can explain it in your own words, and incorporate its truth into your actions and attitudes. Many of us in our pride and independence think we can do all this on our own, but we can’t. The Lord of all life ordained that we live and learn within the family of God, so perhaps the first step in *putting Christ first* is to turn to a discipleship formation leader and ask for help.

*After thirty-five years as evangelicals, Rich Cleveland and his wife Gail became Catholic. Rich is the founder of Emmaus Journey, and he and his wife continue to serve Emmaus Journey, and live in Colorado Springs, Colorado.*