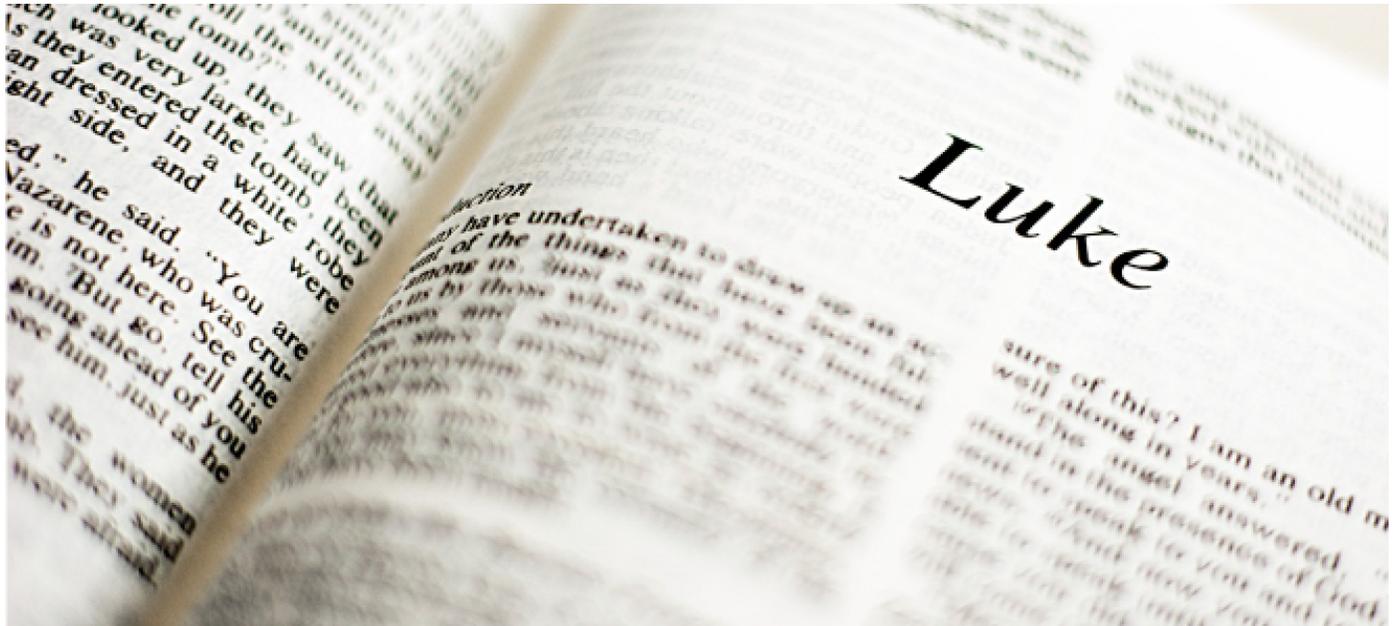


# BEGINNING CLASS WITH THE GOSPEL

by [Robert Mixa](#) · January 23, 2017 · [2 Comments](#)



Teaching high schoolers theology is hard. From dealing with secular indifferentism to religious skepticism, the teacher may be confused where to begin. Hans Urs Von Balthasar opens his *Glory of the Lord: Seeing the Form* pondering beginnings. He says, “[The] beginning is a problem that remains...and determines all subsequent steps. [It] is also a primal decision which includes all later ones...” Balthasar begins his *Trilogy* with God’s truth as it is manifested in the Gospel. I do likewise. I begin every class with the Gospel read at that day’s Mass, followed by an exposition of the Gospel and time for student response. More than a discipline of study, theology is nourished by an encounter with the living Lord in Word and Sacrament. We cannot forget “Christ is present in his word, since it is he who speaks when Scripture is read in Church” (*Verbum Domini*). Instead of focusing on implementing the latest evangelical strategy to help our students have faith, we must trust that the Holy Spirit is working in them while they confront the Word in all its totality. Call me old-fashioned but there is no surer foundation than that.

Theology is not primarily concerned with our words about God but God’s Word about Himself. The Gospel is the Good News of God’s total communication and salvific action in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. But who is this Jesus we have faith in? What I call

“Cartoon Jesus” is very prevalent amongst my students. Culture and, maybe, bad catechesis has led them to see of Jesus as a cartoon. He is the bearded nice guy in a white clothes who is there to help me. While they get some things right, they need a more robust understanding of Jesus. This is why I turn to the Gospels. Daily Gospel reading makes them drop the cartoon. It helps them see the whole truth of Jesus, in all his strangeness and scandal.

Adding to the strangeness, I have my students face the Cross while listening to the proclamation of the Gospel. Bishop Barron’s commentary on the Crucifixion panel of Isenheim Altarpiece inspired me to do this. In *Catholicism*, Bishop Barron points out John the Baptist’s contorted gesture to the crucified Christ. The scandal of the Cross knocks down any comfortable picture we have of God, shocking us so we can be ready to behold the true God as He reveals Himself in the Paschal Mystery. Another reason I do this is because the Bible tells us to. Gazing at the crucified and risen Son while pondering the Scriptures is in accordance with the Book of Revelation. It is there that the slain Lamb opens the Scriptures for us, helping us see the God who is Love. Also, growing up I saw numerous depictions of the saints reading the Scriptures with a crucifix in hand. Orthodox monk, Gabriel Bunge, says “care should be taken that [the cross] depicts not only the suffering and death of the Son of Man but also his victory over death. Many old crosses very beautifully combine *the Tree of Life* and *the wood of the Cross* into one image and thus pictorially remind the person praying that he does so while facing Paradise, his ‘original home’.” Students must know all things, in their ascent to the Father, must pass through the crucified and risen Christ. He is the key and content of reality.

Teenagers remember the stories of the Gospels better than my boring lectures. These stories touch everyone. Personally, the story of the rich young man always awakens me, even in my sleep. The Gospel throws you into a dramatic encounter with Christ where he inevitably calls *you* to discipleship. Our response to Christ is an Either-Or; you are either with Him or against Him. In the brief time I have been teaching and starting class with the Gospel, I can tell it has made some impact on the students.

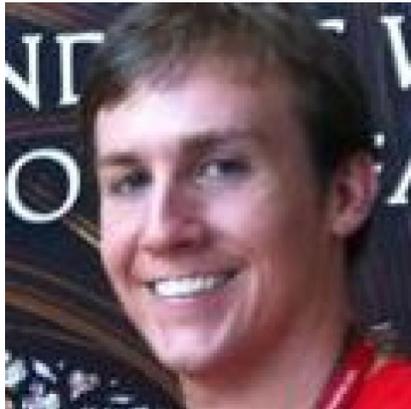
At the beginning of the semester, I ask each student to interiorly answer Jesus’s question to his disciples, “Who do you say that I AM?” By seeing and exploring the whole Jesus as depicted in the Gospels, I hope they will by grace be able to say with Peter, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” The inexhaustible richness of that confession is something I hope they ponder for the rest of their lives. It is the mustard seed of all theology.

Lastly, why do I read the daily liturgy's Gospel instead of just reading the Gospels straight through? For a more thorough answer, read Benedict XVI's Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*. It is there Benedict says Scripture should be read in conjunction with the liturgy because Liturgy is the home of Scripture. Unfortunately, many students do not attend Mass, missing the Eucharist. The Eucharist is not central to their lives and their worldview. *Verbum Domini* says, "the reading of the Bible...must *always* [emphasis mine] be related to the Eucharistic celebration." Scripture must be read in reference to the Mass.

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus explains what was said about Himself in Scriptures followed by the breaking of the bread. It is only in the breaking of the bread and Jesus' disappearance that the disciples finally recognize Him. Likewise, I cannot expect the students to see Christ in the Scriptures unless in association with the Eucharist. My school just started offering daily Mass and Eucharistic Adoration. I am pleased my students will be able to encounter Christ in Word and Sacrament. Goodbye to cartoon Jesus; Come, Lord Jesus Christ!

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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## COMMENTS

February 6, 2017

### GREG AITCHISON

Great stuff, Robert! I teach 7th and 8th grade Theology and always begin class with reading and discussing a faith-related quote that one of my students picks out each day (I pull them from my website, [CatholicQuotations.com](http://CatholicQuotations.com)). Your Gospel reading idea,

however, is even better than that! Kudos to you and keep up the great work for Christ and His Church!

*January 24, 2017*

**JOHN PAYNE**

Thanks for this. I teach middle school religion and I think I'll do the same.