

Telling the full story of the Life of Christ

This article is adapted from the introduction to "[The Life of Jesus Christ](#)," newly published by OSV.

Accepting an Emmy Award for his TV show "[Life Is Worth Living](#)" many years ago, Bishop Fulton Sheen famously told the audience, "I want to express special thanks to my writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John." I'm no Fulton Sheen, but I can't help thinking that I'm entitled to say the same thing concerning my new book "The Life of Jesus Christ" (OSV, \$15.95): Thanks to the four evangelists for supplying the material.

Something that happened not too many years after Bishop Sheen got his Emmy helps to explain how this book came to be. Back then, my wife and I belonged to a Catholic couples' movement whose members came together monthly in [small groups](#) to share a potluck meal and discuss some agreed-upon topic of a religious nature. Our subject for that particular year was the Gospel of Matthew, and, month by month, we worked our way through it, reading and discussing a chapter or two each month.

We rotated the task of [leading the discussion](#) among us, and this month it was the turn of one of the other husbands in our group – a highly educated man who was a lifelong practicing Catholic. We met as usual at the home of one of the couples, shared an enjoyable meal, and then adjourned to the living room for the discussion.

Our leader began by announcing that, out of curiosity, he'd read the whole of [Matthew's Gospel](#) straight through from beginning to end. And then he made a surprising admission: This was actually the very first time in his life that he'd ever read one of the Gospels that way. Having paused to let

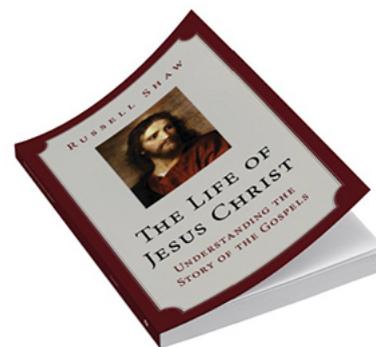
that sink in, he said: “And you know what?” Another pause. Then, in the manner of someone disclosing an exciting discovery: “It’s [telling a story!](#)”

Every Sunday at Mass, our friend went on to explain, he heard a short section of one or the other of the Gospels read out – a bit of instruction this week, a miracle or parable next week, and on and on, week by week – readings that consisted of short, isolated snippets. But unless the priest happened to mention it in his homily (and most didn’t), there was never a hint as to how this week’s snippet related to last week’s and next week’s, much less how it fit into the Gospel narrative as a whole. For that, it was necessary to sit down and read the Gospel as he’d just done. If you did that, you would find out what he had: “It’s telling a story!”

And so it is. The story that the Gospels tell is the life of Jesus Christ.

Thinking that over, as I’ve done now and then since, something else occurred to me. By itself, any one of the Gospels tells only some of the story of Jesus of Nazareth as it has come down to us. Each Gospel contains a special, precious part of the story, but no one of them by itself contains it all. And not only that – while the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke at least follow pretty much the same pattern, the Gospel of John is notably different and contains a great deal of material that is found only there. In order to get the whole story of Jesus as the four Gospels together tell it, you need to combine elements from each of them into a single, coherent narrative.

And that, roughly, is what my book, "[The Life of Jesus Christ](#)," attempts to do.



In a way, there's nothing new about this. "Harmonies" of the Gospels, as they are called, have been composed for a long time. One of the earliest of these, by a second-century Christian named Tatian, was widely used in the Church for several centuries.

Unfortunately, however, Tatian thought his harmonized version could and should be read in place of the four individual Gospels themselves. So let me say as clearly as I can that my book is not meant to replace reading the Gospels but to help people more easily grasp the whole story that each one tells in part. I hope that, in doing this, the book will be useful not only to people coming to the Gospels for the first time but also to those who've read them and been hearing them read individually and a little at a time for many years.

The book is not a fictionalized treatment of the life of Christ in the manner of Fulton Oursler's immensely popular 1950s bestseller "The Greatest Story Ever Told" (Image, \$20). It sticks closely to the Gospels, with only such commentary and explanation as will help make their meaning clearer. Limitations of space have obliged me to leave out many good and important incidents that are present in the originals, which is all the more reason for not stopping here but going on to read and reflect on the four Gospels themselves.

Summing up, then, the purpose of this book is to provide an account of the life of Jesus Christ as it is found collectively in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Modern Scripture scholarship helps us understand many useful

things about the origins and background of the Gospels, but it is true now just as it has always been that [these inspired narratives](#), in the words of the Second Vatican Council, “faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation” (*Die Verbum*, “Dogmatic Constitution On Divine Revelation,” No. 19). I pray that my book will help its readers grasp that wonderful story a bit more clearly.

Finally, though, books – the one I wrote and any others – are only a beginning in what has to be a lifelong, daily enterprise for those who wish to be followers and friends of Jesus Christ. We need to go much further; we need to come to know Jesus himself, and that is something that can only be done by thinking about him, turning over his words and deeds in our minds, and especially by seeking him in prayer and worship.

It is as Msgr. [Romano Guardini](#), a distinguished theologian of the past century whom I quote frequently in “The Life of Jesus Christ,” says: “We do not know very much if we know only the words and the episodes handed down to us concerning him. We do not know very much if we carry a picture of him in our mind as a ceremonial, somewhat unreal, indefinite figure with long hair and a robe with many folds. All that is only a phantom, a delusion. His whole being must ring in our hearts with blood and bone. We must follow him. We must strive to penetrate into the heart of his mystery, to what he really is. Then things become plain to us” (“Meditations on the Christ,” Sophia Institute Press, \$14.95).

If my book serves as a kind of steppingstone along the way for someone who is trying to do that, it will have done what I hope it will do.

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