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Professor of Theology and Chair of the Department
Fordham University, Bronx, NY

Engaging Theology: Catholic Perspectives

Jesus

Word Made Flesh

Gerard S. Sloyan

Tatha Wiley, Series Editor



A Michael Glazier Book

LITURGICAL PRESS

Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

A Michael Glazier Book published by Liturgical Press

Cover design by Ann Blattner.

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sloyan, Gerard Stephen, 1919–

Jesus : Word made flesh / Gerard S. Sloyan.

p. cm. — (Engaging theology : Catholic perspectives)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8146-5991-5

1. Jesus Christ—History of doctrines. I. Title.

BT198.S595 2008

232—dc22

2007052136

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Editor's Preface

In calling the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII challenged those he gathered to take a bold leap forward. Their boldness would bring a church still reluctant to accept modernity into full dialogue with it. The challenge was not for modernity to account for itself, nor for the church to change its faith, but for the church to transform its conception of faith in order to speak to a new and different situation.

Today we stand in a postmodern world. The assumptions of modernity are steeply challenged, while the features of postmodernity are not yet fully understood. Now another world invites reflection and dialogue, and the challenge is to discover how the meanings and values of Christian faith speak effectively to this new situation.

This series takes up the challenge. Central concerns of the tradition—God, Jesus, Scripture, Anthropology, Church, and Discipleship—here are lifted up. In brief but comprehensive volumes, leading Catholic thinkers lay out these topics with a historically conscious eye and a desire to discern their meaning and value for today.

Designed as a complete set for an introductory course in theology, individual volumes are also appropriate for specialized courses. Engaging Theology responds to the need for teaching resources alive to contemporary scholarly developments, to the current issues in theology, and to the real questions about religious beliefs and values that people raise today.

Tatha Wiley
Series Editor

Author's Preface

As a college freshman I bought a Greek grammar at second hand and found it richly commented on and illustrated by the previous owner. The class in the accidence of an ancient tongue was a thrice-weekly hour of charm conducive to doodling to stave off narcolepsy. My "pre-owned" grammar (there are no more used cars) carried on a conversation with the author. When an empty space denoted that a form of a verb did not exist it was identified as "Wanting." A marginal note asked, "Who wants it?" There was a sketch in the end pages of an indigenous American with a tepee in a balloon over his head that contained the thought "Mental Reservation." That sketch must have been done in an ethics class whose dullness invited artistry.

Is the book the student now holds in hand a guaranteed substitute for No-Doz? Hardly. Let it only be said that the textbook that guarantees wakefulness has yet to be written.

There are many hundreds of books about Jesus, good, bad, and different. Few are written with style. Jesus had style, a style so high it is impossible to convey it in a book of words. The four evangelists did a reasonably good job but, even with the help of the Holy Spirit, it was not easy. The magnitude of the man outruns the power of words. There is evidently a convention in textbook writing that the author should not attempt to amuse, entertain, or emotionally engage the reader. An interesting paragraph is at times admissible, perhaps an occasional sentence with color, but nothing more. There is a fabled directive on a piece of sheet music for orchestra and choir that reads, *Religioso, ma non troppo*. Doleful, but not overly. Dr. Johnson told Boswell of a young friend who once considered studying for the ministry but had to abandon the idea because cheerfulness kept breaking in. A character in Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One*, a novel about the burial industry in California, is named Mr. Joyboy. That was Jesus. He would eat and drink with anybody.

The only way to pump a little life into a textbook about him is to get a class discussion going about him, better still, an argument about whether this or that statement in the book has got it right.

I have written about Jesus at book length before. The first time was in 1960 when a journalist friend who had invented a paper for high schoolers she dubbed *Hi-Time* asked me to do a series about him over the course of the school year. Two years later it appeared as a hardcover book titled *Christ the Lord*. Another publisher made a paperback of it when that industry was young. I had another go at our Savior in 1975 with *Jesus on Trial* and again three years later with *Is Christ the End of the Law?* Still another book appeared in 1983, *Jesus in Focus: A Life in Its Setting* and, in 1986, *The Jesus Tradition: Images of Jesus in the West*. The last two were a bit of an improvement on the first try of twenty-odd years before. In four of those cases the impetus came from a woman editor, normally of books in a series, each who loved Jesus deeply and knew what she wanted a book about him to say. Those women are Henriette Mackin, Patricia Kluepfel, Monika Hellwig, and now Tatha Wiley. Two others who said that such and such a book could well exist were Jesus scholars whom I revere as my teachers, John Reumann and Howard Clark Kee.

My long-term colleague at Temple University, Leonard Swidler, wrote a book concerned with the disputed writings and censure of Hans Küng, a priest of Luzern, and the admonition of Edward Schillebeeckx, OP, with a fresh contribution from each. Swidler did the English translation of Küng's essay and asked me to do the same with that of Schillebeeckx, which arrived on a tape of spoken, idiomatic French. Two years after the book appeared I met Schillebeeckx on an open railroad platform in this country, and instead of the customary warm greeting I expected, he said without introduction: "You got an important sentence wrong in your translation of my piece." Guilty as charged.

I fully expect to be told by our Lord at the judgment something similar, delivered in the gentlest of tones. It will be easier to take it from him than from some secretary at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a body from which happily I have never heard.

The real business of a preface such as this is to acknowledge gratefully those who assisted in the preparation and production of the book. The humorist Robert Benchley skewered the genre by thanking the inventors of the Bessemer Open Hearth Process, without which his book could not have been written. Another courageous author thanked his beloved wife and small children, without whom his book would have been completed in half the time. Bereft of such welcome interruptions

by Pope Damasus I, who enjoyed better quarters while depriving the Western clergy of their better halves, I have managed to produce this manuscript only with help of another sort. My auxiliaries in the spread of the Gospel through writing are Dr. Nicholas Rademacher of Cabrini College, Radnor, Pennsylvania; Mary Dancy and Grace Ann Lewis, both of deans' staffs at The Catholic University of America; and Angela Howell of Mayfield Senior School in Pasadena, California. All of these friends are associates in a skill I do not possess. They process words. So do I but in a different sense. But theirs is a skill that, at minimum, requires theological sophistication. Without them this book would not exist. Nor would it exist without the cheerful support of colleagues on the faculty of The Catholic University of America and Georgetown University, where a kind Providence has situated me after retirement from Temple University. There I was privileged over twenty-five years to make sense of Christianity in words in the company of American Jews, Muslims from around the world, and Korean Buddhists, not to speak of some East Coast Protestants and Catholics. Speak of a support system! I have known it over many days and hours as this book was being prepared for in thought and written in fact.

Hyattsville, Maryland
July 2007

Gerard S. Sloyan