

# Jesus Shows Lenin His Wounds

by Richard Rohr, OFM

WHEN I THOUGHT ABOUT WRITING on our next core principle, I immediately thought of a painting that hangs in the famous Eremitage museum in Russia. It is entitled “Jesus Shows Lenin his wounds” and was done by the contemporary German artist, Ernst Kahl. We have now done our own version of this by a friend of the Center, Andrew Sanchez, which serves as the cover of this issue of Radical Grace. The original is a combination of profound social and religious critique. What a message it must be for Russians after the failure of Lenin’s revolution. Our cover is the same and more, and fittingly illustrates our fourth core principle: **“Practical truth is more likely found at the bottom and edges than at the top or the center of most groups, institutions, and cultures.”**

Especially after the recent preoccupations with the deaths of Ronald Reagan and John Paul II, and the elections of George W. Bush and Benedict XVI, it is rather obvious that most people are obsessed with “the leader,” the top person, the front man, the visible symbol. We are enthralled—in awe, admiration, and envy. It is becoming obvious to me that our leaders, especially in times of fear, become both the positive projection screen and the dumping ground for all the admired, desired, rejected, and hated parts of ourselves. They actually take on much more importance and attention than they deserve. We give them far too much power and significance. We give them our own power too, at the price of our own importance in the eyes of God. “See to it that you never despise one of these little ones, for I tell you that their angels in heaven are continually in the presence of my Father” (Matthew 18:10).

You see, Jesus saw things very differently. He was almost totally unimpressed

by kings, glory, public importance, or what we call “the top” or “the center.” This is quite evident and consistent in the four Gospel texts. He, instead, is concerned with and attracted to those at the edge and even the so-called bottom of society. He is no “respector of persons.” He *holds* his own power grandly, and has no need to project it onto kings or high priests. Conversely, he possesses no hatred or resentment to dump onto any Herod or Pilate, any Annas or Caiaphas. Neither Sanhedrin nor Praetorium holds him in thrall. He is not in awe of the top and he is not afraid of the bottom. This is the ultimately free person. Jesus knows where power really lies—which is the only power that God can really use. It is not the power of office, role, distinction, reputation, fame, access, popularity, celebrity status, or public esteem. These are largely unusable by God because they are all ephemeral, a mere social construct and nothing substantial.

Jesus does not even bother to oppose or fight these “powers and principalities.” He just ignores them! He lives his life somewhere else. He refuses to either fight power or flatter power. He literally lived right down ▶ page 16



Jesus shows Lenin his wounds, by Ernst Kahl

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the road from Sepphoris, the local Roman headquarters, and there is no record that he ever even visited the place. After his first visit to the elders in the temple, at age 13, his only contact with them seems to be when *they seek him out to destroy him*. He withdraws his attention from manufactured glory and gives it fully to the one who has all the glory, who “alone is worthy,” the one he calls his “Father.” That is subversion at its best, and is entirely based in spiritual realization. In fact, it will work in no other way. Unless you are “possessed” by God, you will always be subject to possession by every passing fancy and every appeal to fame. They used to hold a stick of burning flax in front of the Pope in his triumphal processions, and one acolyte would keep calling out to him, “sic transit gloria mundi!” — thus passes the glory of the world.

So what would Jesus do with the Lenins, Hitlers, and self-styled emperors of history? *He would show them his wounds*. He would show them his unique plan for renewal and transformation, and as in the original Kahl painting, even the disciples would be laughing and doubting and embarrassed at his naiveté — much as his disciples are doing today. Hardly anyone believes that *we come to God by doing it wrong*, even though the Gospel text makes it overwhelmingly clear. Hardly anyone believes that crucifixion is the path to resurrection. Yet we pretend to make it our absolute central doctrine. We actually do not believe it at all. Even there, especially on the cross, we got enthralled with Jesus’ unique role and power, instead of realizing he was trying to give us our own sonship and daughterhood. We decided to worship him instead of follow him. We love to worship heroes, whereas true heroes have no need or desire for such worship. They always point beyond themselves: “whoever believes will perform the same works, and even greater works than I do . . . because *you know*

*him*, because he is *with you*, he is *in you*!” (John 14:12b, 17b). Those are the words of a superhero, Jesus, who always points to his Father, as the only power worth mentioning.

So we plan to withdraw our attention from power too. It tends to produce what some have called “the war superego,” where private truth dissolves in mass identification with the supposed truth of the leader. Witness the recent U.S. election. Watch the adoring and reverential eyes of the young wannabees as they watch Donald Trump on *The Apprentice*. Instead, we plan to look where Jesus looked for life and love — among ordi-

nary people, wounded people, people in recovery, sinners, people who know they need God and have followed the humble path;

people in prisons, hospitals, and at the edges of every attempt at group worthiness. As I have often put it before, “If you want to know the real truth about any organization or group, don’t ask the principal, the president, or the pastor. They have to say what they have to say, which is ok — *as long as you know that*. If you want the significant and deeper truth, however, go talk to the janitor, the cook, the receptionist, and the volunteers.”

Those at the top, those safe at the center, have too much to protect and too much to “prove” to speak real truth. Only those who have been relegated to the margins can tell you what is really happening at the center, and what is often sacrificed to get to the top. Jesus spent much of his ministry trying to drag his disciples to this utterly new perspective. Their resistance has become the overwhelming pattern and prophecy for all of history. Jesus keeps needing to show his wounds to the Lenins of every age — and to us, who barely believe.

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