

## **INTRODUCTION**

At the opening of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII affirmed that Catholics and Christians of other churches share more than what divides them... More recently, in the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* Pope Francis extended this view to include the entire human family. We all share more than what divides us... We are all connected, whether we realize it and acknowledge it or not. We are all born into this world, we all experience loss, suffering, and doubt. All of us face sickness and death. We all know joy and sorrow.<sup>1</sup>

Francis writes, “no one is saved alone, we can only be saved together.”<sup>2</sup>

Why is this? Because we are relational beings. We are an echo of the triune relationship within God. We find the deepest fulfillment and become more ourselves, the more we go outside of ourselves to forge relationships with others. How much we need this right now, when we feel so divided.

Pope Francis lamented our seeming lack of “common horizons”. He suggested that World War III is already upon us, but in piecemeal, in a series of scattered conflicts, as though we are too divided to even enter a proper “world” war!<sup>3</sup>

We open up the newspaper and open ourselves to righteous indignation. We drink in that poison as though it would hurt the other, when it is only hurting ourselves.

The only way to heal the divisions in the world and foster peace among those around us is by first opening the whole of ourselves to receive God’s healing and peace.

Yet, we only receive God’s healing in unity with others. So it’s not simply an isolated inward movement towards wholeness, or an outward movement toward unity with the individuals in our lives, but a full inhale and exhale.

The air you breath out, becomes the air I breath in. Like a child in the womb of its mother, we rely on our connectedness. We cannot live outside it any more than the preborn baby can live

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1 Slater, Isaac. *Do Not Judge Anyone: Desert Wisdom for a Polarized World*. 133.

2 Quoted in Slater, 134.

3 Slater, 134.

outside its mother's womb. We cannot live for or find meaning through ourselves alone.<sup>4</sup> We cannot cut ourselves from God's vine. To foster relationships is to choose existence over nothingness.

It is only in this give and take, this inhale and exhale, with God and one another that we possess our lives.

It is only in self-giving that we receive ourselves back. Therefore, whether we realize it or not, we are constantly feeding and being fed by one another. Every single action that you and I do, every word that we say to one another, has a direct social consequence. We have the indispensable opportunity to direct each and every one of our actions toward unity in the world and wholeness in ourselves.

It is this journey toward wholeness and unity, which I wish to focus on, in three unified parts; all based upon questions posed in the Gospels.

In the first part entitled – Who are you? – based on the question posed to John the Baptist in the first chapter of John's gospel, I'll discuss individual wholeness as the integration of our dual nature as 1) persons whose being is God and 2) as sinners, who only truly become aware of our sinfulness and need for God through a deepening relationship with Him.

In the second part entitled – What are you looking for? – based on the question Jesus asked Andrew and the other disciple in their initial encounter, I will discuss the inclinations that drive us, the treasures that move our heart, and our only true happiness, which is unity with God Himself.

In the third section entitled – Do you want to be well? – based on the question Jesus posed to the paralytic waiting by the pool of Bethesda, I will discuss the cultivation of a trusting openness to God's healing.

But before God can provide the healing remedy, we must acknowledge our sin. Before we can acknowledge our sin, we must grasp our need to change. Before we can grasp our need to

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4 Ratzinger, *In the Beginning*. 72.

change, we must understand what we desire to become. Before we can understand what we desire to become, we must know who we are.

Let us then begin with the question, Who are you?

## **WHO ARE YOU?**

When Jewish officials in Jerusalem heard of the fiery-tongued baptizer, who testified to “the true light, which enlightens everyone”<sup>5</sup>, they immediately ordered a band of priests and Levites into the desert to learn his identity. Finding John “in Bethany across the Jordan”<sup>6</sup> they demanded answers. “Who are you?”, they asked.<sup>7</sup> “He confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.”

Then they asked him, “Who then are you? Are you Elijah? He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.” Therefore they said to him, “Who are you, so we may have an answer to give to those who sent us? What do you have to say about yourself?”

He replied, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”<sup>8</sup>

John the Baptist, who Jesus Himself acclaimed as being unrivaled in virtue “among those born of women”,<sup>9</sup> knew his place in light of the inestimable glory of Christ, explaining to the band of puzzled Levites and priests, “there is one among you whom you do not recognize... whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie”.<sup>10</sup> John was a holy man. Yet, he too was a sinner in need of God’s grace. His purity provided him “the power to contemplate” his defilement.<sup>11</sup> Our rootedness in God provides us that same power to become aware of our sin.

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5 John 1:9.

6 John 1:28.

7 John 1:19.

8 John 1:19-23.

9 Luke 7:28.

10 John 1:26-27.

11 “Purity is the power to contemplate defilement.” – Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace. Quoted in Sheen, Fulton J. *The Cross and the Beatitudes*, 46.

To that end, we have a bit of a split personality. On the one hand, as The mystical treatise “The Cloud of Unknowing” affirms, “God is our being”.<sup>12</sup> But there’s that other side of the coin, the not so pleasant side, which the desert father Abba Matoes acknowledges when he says, “The nearer a person comes to God, the more he sees himself as sinner.”<sup>13</sup>

Because of sin, we are fractured selves. Within us exists a tale of two cities. We inhabit the story that love tells and in our fallenness we inhabit the story that sin tells.<sup>14</sup>

Let’s first discuss the love story.

In his book “Into the Silent Land,” Martin Laird describes God as “the ground of who we are”.<sup>15</sup> He fills us. His presence courses through our veins, pulses in every cell of our being. Our intimate proximity to Him is like the sponge’s intimacy with water. The sponge looks without and within and sees ocean. It “is immersed in what at the same time flows through it”.<sup>16</sup> This only begins to describe God’s closeness to us. In truth, there is not the tiniest part of us that does not contain God, that is not known and experienced by Him. As St Augustine memorably wrote, God is “closer to me than I am to myself”.<sup>17</sup>

The desert father Abba Joseph speaks of this peace in God as an actual encounter with heaven. His way for experiencing this peace is simple, he teaches “in all circumstances”, without exception: “say, Who am I? And do not judge anyone.” These two steps are closely related. In the first step, I ask: “who is this “I” that would judge another? And by implication, the second step: “Who is this other, really, that I would judge?”<sup>18</sup>

Pope Francis holds “self-accusation”, asking “who am I?” as the “antibody” to the “virus” of division and accusing another, since it is often the case that by judging another, I am in truth disowning some part of myself that I fear or dislike. It is an escape from truly acknowledging

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12 Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 104.

13 Harmless, William, S.J. *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*. Oxford : University Press, 2004, 240.

14 Slater, 138.

15 Laird, Martin. *Into the Silent Land*. 9.

16 Laird, 17.

17 St. Augustine, Confession III, 6, Translation from Martin Laird, 8.

18 Slater, 22-23.

my part in the conflict.<sup>19</sup> This connection with the desert sayings places Francis's famous and seemingly infamous comment, "Who am I to judge?" in its proper context.

Francis wrote that in gentleness and powerlessness upon the cross, Jesus "forced the devil to show himself: the Accuser confuses silence with weakness, and redoubles his attack, revealing his fury, and thereby who he is"<sup>20</sup>.

The closer we come to Jesus and His Cross, the more our true nature is also revealed. With each movement toward Him, we become more aware of the extent of our fallenness and need for Him. On a certain level, this indeed sounds frightening.

Martin Laird writes that, "There is a deeply ingrained tendency...to recoil from our own brokenness, to judge it as others have judged it, to loath it as we have been taught over a lifetime to loathe it. In doing this we avoid what God in Christ draws close to and embraces."

In truth, we do not endanger ourselves by revealing our truth to Christ. Rather, we do ourselves harm when we hide from His love, as our first parents Adam and Eve hid from Him in the garden of Eden.<sup>21</sup>

Mary of Egypt, for instance, spent her early years parading through holy Jerusalem as the "anti-pilgrim",<sup>22</sup> seducing men for fun and leading earnest Christians off the royal road to salvation. Yet, when she attempted to attend liturgy at the Church of the Holy Sepuchre, an invisible power prevented her from entering. Understanding her impurity to be the cause, her heart was suddenly pierced with contrition.<sup>23</sup> She realized that this impurity not only barred her from the church but prevented her from experiencing true freedom. Although initially untroubled by her wickedness, feeling free to do as she pleased, she came to discover the full weight of her bondage and "how closely sinner and sin are welded together".<sup>24</sup>

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19 Slater, 136.

20 Francis, Let Us Dream – Quoted in Slater, 137.

21 Gen 3:8.

22 Mary of Egypt, Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_of\\_Egypt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_of_Egypt).

23 Ibid.

24 Speyr, Adrienne Von. *Confession: The Encounter with Christ in Penance*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1964, 144.

Noticing an icon of the Theotokos just outside the church, she asked Our Lady to pray for the forgiveness of her soul, vowing to renounce her former ways and become a hermitess in the desert. After her heartfelt prayer, she attempted to enter the church again. This time, God granted His sinner entry.<sup>25</sup> Who was Mary of Egypt? First and foremost, she was a sinner in need of God's mercy. She was a sinner, who's being was God.

As the philosopher Carl Jung put it well, "I would rather be whole than good."... To be good is simply to be the opposite of evil. Jung saw wholeness, the acknowledgment and integration of all of myself, even the difficult parts, as the greatest good.

This holds true on the larger scale, on the level of the body of Christ, the integration of all of us together, as far greater a good than positioning ourselves over and against one another. Through this unity, we see our truest nature, the truest nature of those around us, and a semblance of the true unity of God.

Thomas Merton put it this way, "there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace, and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God."

This discovery of one's self and one another in discovering God is at the center of the human experience.

With this, we turn to the second question – What are you looking for?

### **WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?**

Jesus addresses this question to Andrew and the other disciple in their initial encounter. The Gospel of John recounts the scene in this way: "John was standing there with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus pass by, he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." On hearing him say this, the two disciples began to follow Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following him, he asked them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which, translated, is "Teacher"), "where are you staying?" He answered them, "Come and see."<sup>26</sup>

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25 Mary of Egypt, Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_of\\_Egypt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_of_Egypt)

26 John 1:35-39.

Our Lord's question leads the disciples and, by extension, us as modern believers, to examine our motivating forces in life and whether these forces guide to the One thing of lasting value, God Himself.

Along with a firm knowledge of who we are, the question of what we desire, what we are looking for, is a pivotal one - *"for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."*<sup>27</sup>

Merton once put it this way, "If you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I think I am living for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for".

Jesus asks His weeping Mary of Magdala a virtually identical question in John's resurrection account at the empty tomb. Suddenly appearing before her, he asks "Whom are you looking for?".<sup>28</sup> The "what" has become a "who". Mary is looking for Jesus.

Her teacher, her "Rabbouni", has been brutally murdered before her eyes. With His body now missing, everything has been taken away. She is suffering. She doesn't know what to do.

In answer, Jesus simply whispers her name, "*Mary*",<sup>29</sup> and like that He awakens her to His resurrection and to the beginning of a new time in the history of creation.

Mary's attention was fixed on Jesus. Even in His seeming absence, she was consumed with desire to find Him, even just His body that she may anoint it with oil. What was she looking for? Without question, she was looking for Him.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Simone Weil argues that "love is not real unless it is directed toward a particular object."<sup>30</sup> Thus, our attention, directed toward its object, becomes the vehicle for the transmission of our love. It is not our deeds, however great, that

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27 Matt 6:21.

28 John 20:15.

29 John 20:16.

30 Weil, Simone. *Waiting for God*, 184.

move God's heart to become "the slave of his slave."<sup>31</sup> God is only won over by the loving "attention" we show Him.<sup>32</sup>

So prayer is at its essence attention directed toward God.<sup>33</sup> And in looking for God, in paying attention to Him, our desire to find and possess Him increases all the more.

Once after receiving communion, the Canadian mystic Dina Belanger asked our Lord how long He would remain present within her. Christ told her that He will remain for as long as she pays attention to Him.

Is that not incredible? Our Lord is telling her that if we keep focused on Him, He will remain substantially present within us. The hemorrhaging woman of the gospels only needed to touch the hem of Christ's garment and He healed her.<sup>34</sup> In the Eucharist, Christ's actual Heart rests within us.

The loving attention we show our almighty God is our sole means of giving back to Him. For "attention is bound up with desire"<sup>35</sup>, with our love, so that in directing our attention to God we fulfill the ancient command to "love the Lord with our whole heart".<sup>36</sup>

It's worth reflecting on whether Christ is our focus when we go to receive communion. Jesus once lamented to the mystic Sister Josefa Menendez, 'I am in search of love and meet only with thankless neglect. Rare are the souls that truly love Me.'

His words force us to face our own inattentiveness to His presence.

In fact, the original sin of Adam and Eve can be seen as an exercise in inattentiveness, of choosing the fleeting daydream of assumed divinity, to the awareness of God's all-encompassing love.

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31 Weil, WFG, 114.

32 Weil, WFG, 114.

33 Weil, WFG, 105.

34 Matt 9:20.

35 Weil, Simone. *Gravity and Grace*, 107.

36 Deut. 6:5.

In the third chapter of Genesis, after the man and woman had both eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, their eyes were opened. The man and woman realized they were naked and behold, still painfully human.

They responded to this newfound awareness with two important actions: first, they made loincloths for themselves to hide their naked humanity and, in a sense, shield themselves from facing this painful new awareness, and secondly, they hid from God “among the trees of the garden,” so as not to confront God’s greatness over and above their weak and naked flesh.<sup>37</sup> The man and woman resisted facing the reality and limitations of their human nature.

Their inattentiveness became sin, for as Simone mused, “sin is nothing else but the failure to recognize human wretchedness.”<sup>38</sup> By eating the fruit, the man and woman were exposed to one searing truth, that they are not God.<sup>39</sup> All their actions that followed this decisive moment can be seen as desperate attempts to avoid this truth.

It would seem then, that the struggle at the heart of this drama exists between attention and distraction. To this, Simone writes:

*There is something in our souls which has a far more violent repugnance for true attention than the flesh has for bodily fatigue. This something is much more closely connected with evil than is the flesh. That is why every time that we really concentrate our attention, we destroy the evil in ourselves. If we concentrate with this intention, a quarter of an hour of attention is better than a great many good works.*<sup>40</sup>

The effects of this Original Sin of Adam still cling to us, still distract and burden us, still weaken our ability to look for Him and be attentive to Him.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, it is only through the help of God that we can unburden ourselves of the sin, guilt, and shame that weigh us down.

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37 Gen 3:7-8.

38 Weil, GG, 110.

39 Ibid.

40 Weil, WFG, 111.

41 Gaudium et Spes, 17.

We find the motivation to rise above our current state in the same immense love that accepts us in our sinfulness. It is enough for us to peer over the chasm's edge and acknowledge the evil as our own, reminding ourselves that we are under God's protection and His only goal is to reunite us to Himself. As the Lord said to His prophet Isaiah, "I will go before you and level the mountains".<sup>42</sup> There is no sin that our Lord cannot conquer. We need only trust in who we are, in Him.

This brings us to the final question, "Do you want to be well?"

### **DO YOU WANT TO BE WELL?**

*In the fifth chapter of John it reads, "...in Jerusalem, by the Sheep Gate, there is a pool that in Hebrew is called Bethesda... A man who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and was aware that he had been ill for a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be well?"<sup>43</sup>*

Only in God's love can I proclaim myself a sinner in need of healing. And only in His love can I trust in being healed. I must answer Our Lord's question and acknowledge my need to be healed by Him. This reality should not grieve me or send me fleeing for the shadows. These encounters with our poverty and weakness can become the springboard from which we dive into ever greater depths of God's love for us.

I wish to share the pivotal moment in the life of Fr. Walter Cizek, a strong and self-confident Jesuit missionary falsely convicted as a Vatican spy and imprisoned for twenty-three years in Soviet Russia, who after descending into the utter depths of his complete helplessness, finally opened himself to God's healing presence and was forever changed.

In his book, "He Leadeth Me", Cizek writes of being detained in solitary confinement in the notorious Lubyanka prison in Moscow, where he endured a steady and unrelenting barrage of all-night interrogation sessions, some even lasting "for days at a time".<sup>44</sup> During the twelfth

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42 Isa. 45:2

43 John 5:1, 5-6.

44 Cizek, Walter. *He Leadeth Me*. 64.

month of interrogations, Ciszek broke down and signed a falsified document confessing his guilt of espionage.

He writes of the moment:

*“As I signed the pages, largely without reading them, I began to burn with shame and guilt. I was totally broken, totally humiliated...”*

*After signing the first hundred pages, I stopped even the pretense of reading the rest. I just wanted to finish signing them as quickly as possible and get out of the interrogator’s office. My aversion to the whole thing was overwhelming; I condemned myself before anybody could do the same...”<sup>45</sup>*

Yet even after signing the falsified document, the interrogations continued. As the weeks and months drew on, Ciszek recounted:

*“One day the blackness closed in around me completely. Perhaps it was brought on by exhaustion, but I reached a point of despair. I was overwhelmed by the hopelessness of my situation... I could see no way out of it.”<sup>46</sup>*

Yet, in the midst of despair Ciszek saw a light. He knew he could no longer trust himself, and in that realization “it seemed only sensible then to trust totally in God”.<sup>47</sup> The moment changed him. He later wrote of the experience:

*“Across that threshold I had been afraid to cross, things suddenly seemed so very simple. There was but a single vision, God, who was all in all; there was but one will that directed all things, God’s will. I had only to see it, to discern it in every circumstance in which I found myself, and let myself be ruled by it.”<sup>48</sup>*

Fr Ciszek had found his courage. His courage was God. His strength was God’s love for him.

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45 Ciszek, 66-67.

46 Ciszek, 75.

47 Ciszek, 78.

48 Ciszek, 79.

After this concrete moment of conversion, where Fr Cizek made a deliberate choice to give himself completely to God, he relayed the difference in the interrogator's office:

*“Filled with this new spirit and transformed interiorly, I no longer dreaded the next interview with the interrogator. I saw no reason now to fear him, for I saw all things now as coming from the hands of God. I was no longer afraid of making a “mistake,” since God’s will was behind every development and every alternative. Secure in his grace, I felt capable of facing every situation and meeting every challenge; whatever he chose to send me in the future, I would accept.”*<sup>49</sup>

Fr. Cizek recounts that the change in him was so striking that even the interrogator took notice.<sup>50</sup> The interrogator asked him to sign an agreement to serve as “an intermediary between the Kremlin and the Vatican”.<sup>51</sup>

Feeling prompted by the Spirit, Fr. Cizek promptly refused. The interrogator became livid and trembling with rage threatened Cizek with “immediate execution”.<sup>52</sup> Cizek only smiled.

Guards burst in to take him away, not to his execution, but to a Siberia labor camp, where he remained for the next twenty years, where his knowledge of God's infinite and personal love for him not only deepened, but allowed him to become God's healing presence for others in the Siberian labor camp.

It was not that Fr Cizek lacked fear, but rather, encountering his own weakness opened him completely to the healing power of God. Fr Walter Cizek did indeed want to be well. He experienced his brokenness and weakness, but seeing it through the cross of Christ, he did not see his own failure, but what by the grace of Christ he could yet become.<sup>53</sup>

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49 Cizek, 86.

50 Ibid.

51 Cizek, 87.

52 Cizek, 88.

53 Bishop Kallistos Ware. *The Inner Kingdom*, 45. Note: Bishop Kallistos said that when we manfully turn to God in true repentance, “it is to see, not what I have failed to be, but what by the grace of Christ I can yet become”.

The eternal redemption that God has offered us should make us all want to share His divine life with the world. We all “have a duty to participate in the healing process”.<sup>54</sup> We are all broken and “wounded” healers on this pilgrimage home, in order to “give witness to the healing power of God”.<sup>55</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

In this reflection on unity and wholeness, we began by exploring the question, Who am I?, finding that we are 1) persons whose being is God and 2) sinners, who only truly become aware of our sinfulness and need for God through a deepening relationship with Him.

Then, we examined the question “What are you looking for?” and the inclinations that ultimately drive us – concluding that our only true happiness is unity with God Himself. The French philosopher Simone Weil and her understanding of attention, added a further layer when paired with the Genesis story of Adam and Eve and the origin of evil.

Finally, we moved to the subject of healing, using the question that Christ posed to the invalid at the pool of Bethesda, “Do you want to be well?”. The extraordinary faith witness of Jesuit missionary Fr Walter Cizek, provided a real-life story of transformational healing through an openness to God’s grace.

I would like to touch upon one final item, as we enter into Holy Week, the mandorla. The late Jungian psychologist Robert A. Johnson describes this medieval Christian symbol as the “*almond-shaped segment that is made when two circles overlap*”.<sup>56</sup> The symbol represents the overlap of opposites, a sign of healing divisions. Traditionally, the mandorla is depicted as “*the overlap of heaven and earth*”<sup>57</sup>, our crucified Savior serving as the unity between the two circles.

Another example can be seen in the account of the burning bush from the Book of Genesis. Johnson notes, “*there are many bushes and much burning; but in this story the bush and the*

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54 Kasza, John C. *Understanding Sacramental Healing: Anointing and Viaticum*. Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2007, 16.

55 Kasza, 188.

56 Johnson, Robert. *Owning Your Own Shadow: Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche*, 98-99.

57 Johnson, 99.

*burning overlap; the bush is not consumed and we know that two orders of reality have been superimposed. In a moment we find that God is near – the result of the overlap.”<sup>58</sup>*

I believe that each of the three questions introduced today can be understood as mandorlas. In depicting the first question, “Who am I?”, one circle would be labeled “sinner” and the other would read “one whose being is God”. The intersection of these two realities is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

In the second question, “What are you looking for?”, Christ crucified serves to fulfill humankind’s desire for God alone – humankind and God the Father serving as the two circles and Christ as the unifying center. With the final question, “Do you want to be healed?”, Christ on the cross again serves as the bridge between humankind and the healing grace of God.

I explain all this for one reason, the Cross of Christ is the ultimate instrument of unity. In Christ’s Cross, we experience God’s gift of unity and wholeness.<sup>59</sup> In Christ’s Cross, Jesus models what it means to be Christian. If the world is a wheel and the Cross of Christ is at the center of the wheel, the nearer we come to Christ’s Cross, the nearer we ultimately come to every spoke running out to the furthest edge of the rim.<sup>60</sup> All of our questions are answered through the perfect and life-giving Cross of our Savior.

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58 Johnson, 107.

59 Ibid.

60 Image originally used by Dorotheos of Gaza. Mentioned in Slater, 71.

