Imitation of Christ: The essence of a Catholic mindset

An image of Jesus is seen as Pope Francis greets a young woman during the World Youth Day welcoming ceremony in Blonia Park in Krakow, Poland, July 28. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

My wife and I recently finished watching a series on Netflix. As with any well-written show, I found myself engrossed in the characters and storyline. Throughout the day, I caught myself thinking about the latest plot twist and counting down the hours to when I could watch the next episode.

In my last blog post, I wrote that "Catholics no longer think like Catholics. They think like Republicans, Democrats, liberals, conservatives, socialists, or secularists, but not as Catholics." What is the key to restoring a Catholic way of thinking? In short, Catholics must seek to think like Jesus.

And for me to think like Jesus, I need to replicate my experience of "binge watching" television shows such as "Lost," "Downton Abbey," "Blacklist" or more recently, "Stranger Things" by "binge meditating" on the life of Jesus. In the past, while commuting to work, sending an email, or watching the children, I was reviewing the latest episode of the show in the back of mind. As a Catholic, I need keep the mindfulness of a world beyond our present world, but replace the television show with the life of Jesus. In this process, my life will be less molded by the fictional characters of the newest hit show, and more by the life of Jesus.

The concept of imitating Jesus has a rich tradition in Catholicism. In the New Testament, St. Paul commented, "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord," (1 Thessalonians 1:6) and St. Peter wrote, "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21). Saints built on this biblical tradition, and fully developed the idea of following Jesus. Famously, St. Francis of Assisi emphasized a literal imitation of Christ, and Thomas a Kempis wrote The Imitation of Christ, perhaps the most popular devotional book ever on the concept.

Quite simply, Jesus is the model Christian. He is the paradigm. To follow in his steps, Catholics must immerse themselves in the life of Jesus. That is, they need to read and reflect on the Gospels. Often Gospel passages are plucked out of context to

justify a position, but we are called to accept the whole Gospel, the parts that are easy to follow and the parts that hard to follow.

Beyond reading the Gospels, Catholics should mediate on the mysteries of his life – his birth, his death, his resurrection, with particular focus on a daily reflection on his passion and death. As Catholics become more aware of the life of Christ, they should have a greater sensitivity to the living like Jesus. It has become trendy to speculate "what would Jesus do?" but seeking to live out that simple phrase is the essence of being a Christian, uniting our will with the will of Jesus.

It can be intimidating to imitate Jesus. While he was fully human, he was also God. The gap between Jesus and humanity is vast, and it is hard to ascertain how we can be like Jesus. Moreover, Jesus lived in a different time and had a different vocation from most modern Americans. How does a modern, married, businessman model his life on Jesus? It is helpful to look at the lives of Mary and the saints. Mary is highest of all creatures, and Catholics understand her as means to become closer to Jesus. Mary's life provides a perfect example of how we are called to unite with Jesus. In addition to Jesus and Mary, the saints provide further examples in numerous vocations, time periods, and locations. In the wisdom of the church, she provides the saints as tangible models to imitate the life of Christ. Therefore, the formation of a Christian mindset is aided by knowledge of the lives of saints, and reading their spiritual instructions.

Even with the examples of Mary and the saints, it is still difficult to imagine how we can become like Christ. Fortunately, God has done the majority of the work. The wonderful mystery of the Incarnation is that God became man, entering the world as a little and poor baby in Bethlehem. We do not have to cross the great abyss to encounter Jesus; he crossed it for us. During his life, humans were able to see God face to face. With his Ascension to heaven, however, Jesus did not leave us. God sent the Holy Spirit only 10 days later at the great feast of Pentecost, and he also left us the sacraments. Jesus is present to us in Mass, and in the Blessed Sacrament. We need to spend time with Jesus in order to become more like him, and for us, we are with Jesus through frequent reception of Holy Communion and visits to the Blessed Sacrament.

Catholics no longer think like Catholics because they do not think like Christ. We have immersed ourselves in the lives of politicians, celebrities and fictional characters rather than the life of Christ. We can restore a Catholic mindset by imitating Christ, which begins with reading the Gospels, studying the lives of Mary and the saints, and regular reception of Holy Communion and visits to the Blessed Sacrament.