[**A Lesson on Text Criticism and the Beatles’ *Let it Be***](http://www.catholicstand.com/a-lesson-on-text-criticism-and-the-beatles-let-it-be/)

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One of the commonly asked questions of Sir Paul McCartney is whether his lovely song *Let It Be* is about the Virgin Mary.

It is a beautiful song. A studio outtake reveals that the earliest version had a nearly-solemn quality. Of course, many know that Paul McCartney and John Lennon had a friendly songwriting competition. It is evident in many of their outtakes. Unsurprisingly then, just seconds before the tape rolls on the first recording of *Let it Be*, you can hear John being naughty, trying to unnerve his friend, asking, “Are we *supposed* to giggle in the solo?” Paul replies without missing a beat, “Yeah.” Then he adds with affected braggadocio: “This’ll – this is gonna *knock you out*, boy.” McCartney knows a good song, and this was one of his best. The studio goes quiet, the light goes on, and the familiar piano chords commence. The take comes out very close to what the final take will sound like, as many of McCartney’s first takes do.

Throughout the song, McCartney’s voice is vulnerable yet resolute. It gives me goose bumps to hear, every time.

Is this song about the Virgin Mary? McCartney typically answers the question by assuring his fans that they can interpret the song however they would like. However, he is always careful to say that the literal genesis of the song was a particular event: During the final days of the Beatles, their business was in chaos caused by a bitter management dispute, and the four guys who had been close friends for years were coming unglued. One night, Paul’s mother Mary, who had passed away, appeared to him in a dream and comforted him, telling him to let go. That’s all.

You must understand that during the 1960s, John Lennon had told a reporter – as a fact, by the way – that the Beatles were probably more popular than Jesus was. He wasn’t bragging. I think he was trying to say, look at these kids, they’re insane, they’re looking for meaning. What in the world are they doing trying to find it in a little guitar band? He was right. He later affirmed that in his view, “the Beatles were just four guys who formed a band, and made it very, very big, that’s all.”

The Jesus comment sparked record burnings and death threats, all the things that Christians should not have been involved in. Lennon should not have said it, but the lesson had been learned, Paul McCartney was understandably wary of making any reference to religion. This is more of a reflection of how volatile the 1960s were than anything to do with the Beatles.

Now, be honest. Do you believe the song *Let it Be* is not manifestly about the Virgin Mary? The words tell us about the hour of darkness, a broken hearted world, an eternal light, and an eternal life giving wisdom. There is universality in McCartney’s longing for the answer to suffering. The Blessed Mother knows this more than anyone does.

Yes, the song is absolutely about the Virgin Mary.

I once took part in a discussion on the Internet in which I attempted to defend this view. It is not a popular view, mind you. The received view is the one I related earlier, that Paul McCartney himself had cleared the matter up. The guys I argued with said *that settled it*. It is not about the Virgin Mary *because the author said it was about something else*.

Those words gave me a moment of clarity that I will never forget. I asked myself, is *that* a sufficient reason to say the song is not about the Virgin Mary? The author had spoken, so the case is closed? In this logic, I spotted a style of reasoning that I was taught to treat with suspicion, thanks to my Catholic education. Here was vintage Cartesian error, from the deceptively simple mental model of Rene Descartes.

The Cartesian influence in the history of ideas led directly and indirectly to the modern principle of text interpretation that *the meaning of a text is the author’s psychological intention*. If the author is alive, all one needs to do is ask him what he was thinking when he wrote it. If the author is not alive, the task is to infer, based on historical circumstances, what he most likely had in mind.

As I said, this picture is compelling because it is so deceptively simple.

It might surprise you to know that Catholics don’t necessarily think this way, at least not exclusively. I certainly don’t. Our recent Popes do not think this way. The interpretive principle of authorial intent is useful in its place, but when it is promoted as the sole criterion of truth, it is flawed.

Why does the Church care about authorial intent? We care because the Catholic tradition involves reading and interpreting Scripture and the works of the Doctors and Saints. We think quite hard about what words mean, and we think quite a bit about how we know for certain what words mean.

In my mind, there are two reasons why the author’s intent cannot be the definitive criterion of the meaning of a text. First, such a theory of meaning leaves no place for the truth itself. Nowhere in this Cartesian model is the question even raised as to whether what the author said is true.

There is only the *fact* that the author wrote such-and-such words. The task of the interpreter is to reconstruct the author’s subjective psychological state at the time and to thereby establish the fact. Excuse me, but when did psychology replace truth? What happened to the truth? Modern scholars might reply with sincerity, “What difference would *that* make?”

Second, the principle of the author’s intent as a standard of accuracy is psychologically unrealistic. I am a psychologist, so I can say this.

Your friend asks, “What do you feel like for dinner?” You say “pizza.” Your friend talks you into a steak and a potato. After dinner you say, “My goodness thank you! You knew what I wanted better than I did.” You did not want pizza for dinner after all. Did you lie? Descartes might say you did. You and I know better. Sometimes we have to get to know our own intentions. We are not reporters taking stenography as spectators inside our skulls, we are people finding our way, getting to know the truth about ourselves, about others, about the world, and about God.

Did Paul himself know what the song *Let it Be* was about when he wrote it? My answer is that, like you and I, he might not have been fully aware of the universal truth he was communicating. *You* have to help him answer that question. You participate in his spiritual milieu. Paul was raised Catholic, so you know full well that he knew the Blessed Mother would have said “Let it Be” – (or in Latin *fiat*). Whether he remains Catholic I don’t know. But he would certainly agree that if his song is about consolation, light, and solace, this would be a faithful portrait of the mercy of our Blessed Mother.

***Let It Be –* The Beatles**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ih-8K1a_SsA>

When I find myself in times of trouble  
Mother Mary comes to me  
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be  
And in my hour of darkness  
She is standing right in front of me  
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be  
  
Let it be, let it be  
Let it be, let it be  
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be  
  
And when the broken-hearted people  
Living in the world agree  
There will be an answer, let it be  
For though they may be parted  
There is still a chance that they will see  
There will be an answer, let it be  
  
Let it be, let it be  
Let it be, let it be  
Yeah, there will be an answer, let it be  
Let it be, let it be  
Let it be, let it be  
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be  
  
Let it be, let it be  
Ah, let it be, yeah, let it be  
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be  
  
And when the night is cloudy  
There is still a light that shines on me  
Shine on until tomorrow, let it be  
I wake up to the sound of music,  
Mother Mary comes to me  
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be  
  
Let it be, let it be  
Let it be, yeah, let it be  
Oh, there will be an answer, let it be  
Let it be, let it be  
Let it be, yeah, let it be  
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be

**The Beatles: *Let It Be***

1. What do you think the lyrics mean? What are some keywords that helped you to draw this conclusion? Explain

2. How does the music fit in with the lyrics when the song starts? Do you think that the lyrics would have the same effect if they were set to different music?

3. Paul McCartney claims that there are no religious undertones to this song, but John Lennon disagrees. Whose side do you agree with and why?

4. Jeffrey McLeod argues that *Let It Be* is undoubtedly based upon Christian theology. What arguments does McLeod make to support his opinion? Explain