

Topic 12: The Incarnation

Jesus is the only Son of God who became man for our salvation. He is perfect God and perfect man. He took on our material and bodily condition, subject to many needs, in order to save us from our sins. Mary is truly the Mother of God because the One she conceived as man, through the work of the Holy Spirit, is the eternal Son of the Father.

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1. Identity of Jesus in the New Testament

The Gospels tell us the story of Jesus, which is the foundation of the Church's Christological doctrine. Christology is nothing else than the reflection on who Jesus is and what He came into the world to do.

This reflection has its starting point in the New Testament writings: the Gospels, the letters of St. Paul and St. John, and the other texts. They are concerned about both who Jesus is and his importance for mankind. And they start from a very important conviction: that Jesus cannot be only a man. In fact, in the years following the resurrection, the first Christians venerated the name of Jesus, praised Him, sang hymns to Him and gathered on Sundays to celebrate the Eucharist in his memory.

All this is quite logical when one considers the life of Jesus as a whole. In the light of the Gospels, it is clear that Jesus saw himself as God's unique representative in the world. And He claimed (in a humble and natural way) divine prerogatives such as the ability to forgive sins, to reform the word that God had given to the people through Moses, and even demanded absolute love for his own person. Moreover, he confirmed all this with important miracles such as the raising of Lazarus, which showed his dominion and power over the cosmic elements, men and demons. He rose from the dead, and from the throne of the Father sent the Holy Spirit. All this also meant that Jesus fulfilled the promises God had made to Israel when the fulness of time arrived: the promise to establish a Kingdom that would last forever, of which He, Jesus, was the Messiah-King enthroned in heaven. Jesus could not be just a man,

however holy one might imagine Him to be.

This conviction was confronted, however, with a fundamental question: what was Jesus' exact relationship to God? This question was not easy for the early Christians to answer. They held that there was only one God, but they also realised that Jesus had acted and spoken as if he were God himself. The problem then was very clear: can Jesus be said to be God, and in what sense?

Doesn't that mean holding that there are two gods? The latter was an absurdity, for they, like all Jews, were also convinced that there is not – that there cannot be – more than one God. What, then, is Jesus' relationship to the God of Israel?

This reflection will gradually lead to satisfactory solutions. Already in the letters of St. Paul we see that the apostle uses various ways to express

the divinity of Jesus, without confusing Him with God the Father and without affirming two gods. For example, in the first letter to the Corinthians Paul writes: “for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor 8:6). He speaks here of “one God and one Lord, Jesus Christ,” which puts God the Father and Christ on the same level in practice, since in the Old Testament “Lord” was “the more usual name by which to indicate the divinity of Israel's God” (*Catechism*, 446). “By attributing to Jesus the divine title ‘Lord,’ the first confessions of the Church’s faith affirm from the beginning that the power, honour and glory due to God the Father are due also to Jesus because ‘he was in the form of God’” (*Catechism*, 449).

This is made even clearer in the Gospel of John, which right from the first verse clearly distinguishes God the Father from the Word of God, who was in God from before time and who was God himself (cf. Jn 1:1). Jesus, says John, is the incarnate Word, who became man and came into the world for our salvation. This Word existed before time and creation and is therefore not created. He has always been the Word of the Father, and is therefore distinct from the Father even though He is in relationship with Him. This is an important text, in which John answers the problem of how to say that Jesus is God without saying that there are two gods. This Word, John says, is divine like the Father himself, but he cannot be considered a second God because he is completely in relation to the Father. This opens the way for a consideration of the one God as a Trinity of persons: Father, Son and Spirit. Thus, in the New

Testament the God of Israel opens up his intimacy and reveals himself as Love, Love which reflects the perfect unity of the three divine persons.

2. Identity of Jesus in light of the Christological Councils

In the centuries following the apostolic era, the Church better defined its knowledge of Jesus and deepened it on the basis of what the New Testament had affirmed. The spread of the Gospel brought it into contact with the non-Jewish world, and in particular with Greek thought, which admitted a plurality of gods in varying degrees.

In this context Jesus could be thought of as a second God, lesser than the Father and capable of change and taking on human form (unlike the Father who would be immutable). This was Arius' position against which the Council of Nicaea reacted

in 325 (cf. *Catechism*, 465). This council formulated the words that we recite every Sunday in the Creed, namely that Jesus is “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father.” This made it clear that the Father and the Son share the same unique divine nature and have the same dignity.

A century later another important problem was raised: if Jesus is God, how can He be at the same time man? Experience tells us that a man is an individual and God is also a distinct and individual being. How can they be one reality? In the case of Christ, isn't it a question of two distinct beings, yet profoundly united in some way? This was the proposal of the patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius. For him God and the man Jesus form a unity because they always act in perfect conjunction. Just as a galloping horse and the

rider who leads it act in conjunction, and conform to each other, although in reality they are two distinct beings who form a single figure. With this approach Nestorius concluded that Jesus was born, lived in Palestine, died on the cross, etc., but the same could not be said of God. The eternal Word is immutable and cannot be born as a human being. Therefore Mary cannot be said to be the mother of God, but only the mother of the man Jesus.

The problem with this solution is that it did not really guarantee that Christ was one being, one living reality, as we see in the Gospels. It was opposed by the Council of Ephesus in 431. This Council held that the second person of the Trinity, the Word of God, had become flesh, that is, had taken on a human nature as his own (cf. *Catechism*, 466). Therefore Jesus was one being and not two distinct beings, more or less united, as

Nestorius held. By the name “Jesus” we refer to the Word, once he has made human nature his own, once he has become man. This doctrine is known as the “hypostatic union” (because human nature is integrated into the pre-existent person of the Word, into the “hypostasis” of the Word). It was formulated at the Council of Ephesus.

Some people, however, misunderstood this doctrine and thought that the human element in Christ, absorbed as it was in the divine person, was then dissolved in it. Thus the human element in Jesus would lose all its consistency. To overcome this error, twenty years later, another ecumenical Council, held in the city of Chalcedon, reformulated the position of Ephesus in a somewhat different way: Jesus is one single person, the Council said, but He exists in a twofold way: as God eternally and as man in time. He

is true God and true man, perfect God and complete and whole man. From then on, later councils clarified the doctrine of Chalcedon and drew some consequences, for example, that Jesus has a true human will, since he is truly man. And as a man He accomplished the work of our salvation.

3. The Incarnation

Beyond the historical issues, what is fundamental in the doctrine of the Incarnation is the personal presence of the Son of God in history. Through his human words and actions we come to know the Son of God, and in some way we understand what God himself is like. And what we see, above all, is that God is Love, a Love capable of giving his life for us.

The Incarnation is the work of the Triune God. The Father sends his Son into the world, that is, the Son enters

into time and takes on as his own the human substance, the humanity that the Holy Spirit brings forth in Mary's virginal womb, with her co-operation and consent. Thus the Word of God, who existed eternally, also begins to exist as man in history.

The presence of the Son of God in history is also the closeness of the Father and the Holy Spirit, for in Jesus and through Him the other divine persons are also made known to mankind. St. John in particular insisted on this. The coming of Jesus reveals the intimate and inaccessible features of the divine Being, so that the One whom "no one has ever seen" (Jn 1:18) is made manifest in the life of Christ, the incarnate Only-Begotten Son. Christ shows through his gestures, affections and words, his relationship with the Father and with mankind, God's benevolence towards creatures and the value and meaning of human life.

Jesus is therefore the only Son of God who became man for our salvation. He is also the Bearer of the Holy Spirit, his temple and dwelling place in history, and is therefore also called Christ, the Anointed One. Certainly, other figures of ancient Israel were anointed with oil on the occasion of their particular vocation or mission and to signify the presence of the divine Spirit in them. But Jesus' anointing is much more radical, for it stems from his own reality as man, from the mystery of the Incarnation. Jesus comes into the world totally anointed by the Spirit, and therefore everything in Him evokes the divine presence and reflects the purity and spirituality of Heaven.

And this radical presence of the Spirit also fills Him with grace and supernatural gifts, which He displays in his actions, filled with justice and goodness, and which inspire his words, both imperious and gentle,

but always imbued with wisdom and life. Everything in Jesus' life reveals God's love to us. And this love, which fills his human heart, is poured out on the world He encounters, a world damaged by sin, to restore it and lead it back to the Father.

4. Human knowledge and will of Jesus

We have already said that Jesus is perfect God and perfect man.

Certainly, since He is God, Jesus has eternal and timeless knowledge of all things. But once He becomes man, his knowledge of the world follows the ways proper to our human way of knowing. That is, Jesus, like us, knows external reality through sense experience, images, concepts, etc., which are formed in his human mind. In becoming incarnate, Christ did not want to bypass the laws of nature, and therefore He too had to learn many things like every human

being. He learned to speak, to read, to work, to know little by little what is needed for life. And he also had to learn many things from the religious tradition of Israel, taught to Him mainly by Mary and Joseph.

Christ's human mind, like any human intellect, was limited. But this does not mean that our Lord did not have knowledge beyond what is possible for human experience and knowing: supernatural knowledge. The Gospels make clear, for example, that Jesus foresaw the betrayals of St. Peter and of Judas. In these and similar cases, these were intuitions presented to the human mind of Christ through divine inspiration.

However, the most important and profound knowledge that Jesus had in his life here on earth was of his Father God. This knowledge was also deeply supernatural and formed a permanent dimension of his intimate

life. The Person of Jesus was eternally united to the Father (He is the only-begotten Son of the Father), and his humanity had been assumed (integrated) into his Person. Hence Jesus experienced in his human consciousness his perfect unity with the Father. He was fully aware of being the Son of God, sent into the world to save mankind.

The Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church summarises the human knowledge of Christ in this way: “The Son of God assumed a body animated by a rational human soul. With his human intellect Jesus learned many things by way of experience; but also as man the Son of God had an intimate and immediate knowledge of God his Father. He likewise understood people’s secret thoughts and he knew fully the eternal plans which he had come to reveal” (no. 90).

Jesus also had a true human will and was a fully free man. He was free in the first place because He was not subject to the inner disorder which we experience due to original sin, and which leads us to yield easily to the three “concupiscences” – the lust of the world, the lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh – and to be enslaved by them. The Holy Spirit shaped his humanity from the beginning in Mary’s womb and was always fully present in his life thereafter. But in a deeper sense Jesus was free because his actions were always driven by love for his Father and the mission He had been given. He desired at all times to carry out the will of the Father, and the love of the Holy Spirit in his heart imbued his actions with justice and charity. Hence, as the Second Vatican Council said, Jesus is always for us the model of who man is (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

This great freedom of Christ manifested itself in many ways. He did not allow himself to be conditioned by people or circumstances or any form of fear, nor did He bow to the cultural barriers of the society of his time, in which the righteous despised sinners and sought to avoid them. Jesus, on the contrary, ate with sinners and even chose some disciples, such as Matthew, from environments that were socially frowned upon. He had no problem in breaking with useless legal rules, even if they were widespread in his time, nor in getting angry and overthrowing the tables of merchants who violated the sacred dignity of the Temple. He did not allow himself to be conditioned by his family, nor by power structures. He had no qualms in confronting the Pharisees and denouncing what they were doing wrong. And above all, He was eager to give his life for us. So we see that Jesus enjoyed a great

freedom, which always allowed Him to choose what was good for people, what was pleasing to the Father.

In all his actions Jesus carried out with his human will what He had eternally decided together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Christ's actions brought God's love and mercy for mankind into the realm of human history.

5. Value of the mystery of the Incarnation

When we recite in the Creed "He came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man," we affirm that the humanity assumed by the Word is true and real, from the flesh of a woman, so that He is one of us and belongs to our race. If this were not so, He would not have a human heart and soul. Nor could He suffer and die, and there would be

no resurrection. That is why the mystery of the Incarnation is the basis and presupposition of all the other mysteries of the life of Jesus.

The Word took on our material and bodily condition, subject to many needs, in order to save us from our sins and bring us back to the house of our Father God, since God created us to be his adopted children. This work of salvation is carried out by our Lord in all his deeds, also during the years of his youth (the so-called “hidden life” of Christ), which did not have much public repercussion.

All the actions of Jesus bring about our redemption, because by carrying them out in a just and righteous way, pleasing to the Father, He also enables us to do the same, and thus opens up the way for us. The Church Fathers liked to say that Jesus, by making our nature his own, healed and purified it. We can continue this

idea by saying that our Lord also purified ordinary life, by making it his own, and transformed it into something pleasing to God. As St. Josemaría said: “Jesus, growing up and living like one of us, reveals to us that human existence, ordinary everyday activity, has a divine meaning.”^[1] — From his place in heaven, the risen Jesus gives us his grace so that we can discover in our daily endeavours the love God has for us, and thus they may become for us a path of sanctification. Hence Jesus, with his very life, is our way, leading us to the Father.

In addition to their *redemptive* value, all the works of Jesus also have a *revealing* value, because they show us God’s love for us, and a *recapitulatory* value, because they carry out God’s plan for humanity and establish God’s sovereignty, his kingdom, in the world.

6. Mary, the mother of God and of the Church

The Virgin Mary was predestined to be the Mother of God from all eternity with the Incarnation of the Word.

“To become the mother of the Saviour, Mary ‘was enriched by God with gifts appropriate to such a role’ (LG, 56)” (*Catechism*, 490). At the Annunciation, the archangel Gabriel greeted her as “full of grace” (Lk 1:28). Before the Word became incarnate, Mary was already, by her correspondence to the divine gifts, full of grace. God gave her these special gifts of grace because He was preparing her to be his Mother. Guided by them, she was able to give her free consent to the announcement of her vocation (cf. *Catechism*, 490), to remain untainted from all personal sin (cf. *Catechism*,

493) and to give herself fully to the service of the Son's redemptive work.

She herself was redeemed from her conception: "Through the centuries the Church has become ever more aware that Mary, 'full of grace' through God, was redeemed from the moment of her conception. That is what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception confesses, as Pope Pius IX proclaimed in 1854: 'The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin' (DS 2803)" (*Catechism*, 491).

Mary is truly the Mother of God because "the One whom she conceived as man by the Holy Spirit . . . was none other than the Father's eternal Son, the second

person of the Blessed Trinity” (*Catechism*, 495).

Mary was always a Virgin. Since ancient times, the Church confesses in the Creed and celebrates in her liturgy “Mary as the . . . ‘ever-virgin’ (cf. LG, 52)” (*Catechism*, 499; cf. *Catechism*, 496-507). This faith of the Church is reflected in the ancient formula: “Virgin before childbirth, in childbirth and after childbirth.”

From the beginning, “the Church has confessed that Jesus was conceived solely by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, affirming also the corporeal aspect of this event: Jesus was conceived ‘by the Holy Spirit without human seed’” (*Catechism*, 496). Mary was also a virgin in childbirth, because Jesus, at his birth, consecrated her virginity (cf. *Catechism*, 499). And she also remained a virgin after the birth of Jesus.

Mary was assumed into Heaven.

“The Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from every stain of original sin, at the end of her life on earth, was taken up to the glory of heaven and raised to the throne by the Lord as Queen of the universe, to be conformed more fully to her Son, Lord of lords and conqueror of sin and death.” Her Assumption is an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians (cf. *Catechism*, 966).

Mary is the Mother of the Redeemer. Therefore her divine motherhood also entails her cooperation in the salvation of mankind: “Embracing God's salvific will with a full heart and impeded by no sin, she devoted herself totally as a handmaid of the Lord to the person and work of her Son, under Him and with Him, by the grace of almighty God, serving the mystery of redemption” (*Lumen Gentium*, 56). This cooperation is manifested principally in her

spiritual motherhood. Mary is truly our mother in the order of grace and cooperates in the birth to the life of grace of the faithful and their spiritual development. Moreover, from heaven she watches over us as our mother, procuring through her manifold intercession the graces of God that we need for our Christian vocation and our salvation (cf. *Catechism*, 969).

Mary is the type and model of the Church: “The Virgin Mary is the Church's model of faith and charity. Thus she is a ‘preeminent and . . . wholly unique member of the Church’ (LG, 53); indeed, she is the ‘exemplary realization’ (*typus*) of the Church (LG, 63)” (*Catechism*, 967). St Paul VI, on 21 November 1964, solemnly named Mary Mother of the Church, in order to underline explicitly the maternal function our Lady exercises over the Christian people.

Hence it is easy to understand why the Church's piety towards our Lady is an intrinsic element of Christian worship. Mary "is rightly honoured by the Church with special devotion" (*Catechism*, 971), shown in the numerous feasts, liturgical memorials and practices of piety that we Catholics dedicate to her.

Basic bibliography

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Saint John Paul II, *I Believe in Jesus Christ. Catechesis on the Creed (II)*.

^[1] *Christ is Passing By*, 14

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