

JESUS (PART ONE)
SON OF GOD, SON OF MARY, FULLY HUMAN, FULLY DIVINE
 (C 422-486, 512-570, USC Ch. 7)

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us... (Jn 1:14)

... I believe in one God,
 the Father almighty,
 maker of heaven and earth,
 of all things visible and invisible.
 I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
 the Only Begotten Son of God,
 born of the Father before all ages.
 God from God, Light from Light,
 true God from true God,
 begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;
 through him all things were made.
 For us men and for our salvation
 he came down from heaven,
 and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the
 Virgin Mary, and became man.
 (Nicene Creed)

“At the heart of Christianity is a provocative claim: *In Jesus Christ, God has become a creature, without ceasing to be God and without compromising the integrity of the creature he becomes.*”

(Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I.)

In this article we will look at:

- Why the Word became flesh
- Jesus’ hidden years
- His public ministry
- His humanity and divinity
- His names and titles

In his book *Catholic Christianity*, Peter Kreeft writes: “The Incarnation was the most astonishing of all God’s acts, the most surprising, unforeseeable, unimaginable thing that ever happened. The immortal God, who has no beginning or end, became a mortal man, with a beginning (he had a mother!) and an end (he died). The Author of all of history stepped into the drama he created and became one of his own characters, without ceasing to be the Author. The Creator became a creature. ‘He whom the world could not contain was contained in a mother’s womb’ (St. Augustine). No man ever dreamed this could happen” (p. 69).

Why the Word became flesh

The *Catechism* (457-460) gives us four reasons:

- *The Word became flesh in order to reconcile us to the Father.* “It is as if the governor voluntarily became a prisoner and went to the electric chair in place of the condemned murderer, to set the murderer free” (ibid. p. 74).
- *The Word became flesh to reveal to us God’s love.* “God’s love for us was revealed when God sent into the world his only Son so that we could have life through him...” (1 Jn 4:9).
- *The Word became flesh to be our model of holiness.* Jesus came to show us how to love God and others, especially the sick and marginalized members of society.
- *The Word became flesh to make us partakers of God’s divine nature.* When the priest or deacon pours drops of water into the wine during Mass, he quietly prays: “By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”

The hidden years

We know very little about the first thirty years of Jesus’ life. He was born in a stable in Bethlehem. With his parents he was a migrant (perhaps an undocumented one) in Egypt for some years. Then he returned to Nazareth where he lived with his parents as a member of a local community.

Commenting on these hidden years of Jesus’ life, the *Catechism* (531) states: *During the greater part of his life Jesus shared the condition of the vast majority of human beings: a daily life spent without evident greatness, a life of manual labor. His religious life was that of a Jew obedient to the law of God, a life in the community. From this whole period it is revealed to us that Jesus was “obedient” to his parents and that he “increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.*

Before Jesus exploded on the public scene, it is good for us to remember that he lived thirty years of his life in obscurity, becoming holy in and through the daily tasks of life.

Did Jesus have brothers and sisters? There are references in the scriptures to the brothers and sisters of Jesus (Mk 6:3). What are we to make of this? Catholic Tradition holds that Mary was always a virgin and did not give birth to other children. Also,

scriptures that refer to Jesus' so-called brothers and sisters use a word that also means *cousins*. Even in our own day, some cultures refer to relatives as brothers and sisters. If Mary had other children, it is unlikely that Jesus would have asked John to care for his mother (Jn 19:27). Another explanation of the reference to Jesus' brothers and sisters is this: that Mary married a widower, Joseph, who had children from his first marriage. The first book written about Mary in 150 AD, *Protoevangelium of James*, states that Mary married a widower, Joseph, who had children from a previous marriage. In this case, the brothers and sisters of Jesus were in fact his stepbrothers and stepsisters. The Eastern Church, which dates back to the Apostles, has always accepted this interpretation.

Pause: What can we learn from reflecting on the private or hidden years of Jesus' life?

The public ministry

Jesus' public life or ministry begins with his Baptism. Amazingly, Jesus chooses to stand in line on the bank of the River Jordan to receive a "sinner's baptism" (Mt 3:13-17). In and through this action, Jesus was joining himself to sinful humanity whom he would free from sin through his embrace of the cross and his Resurrection. Jesus' reception of the Holy Spirit would empower him to preach and teach with authority in a way that touched the minds and hearts of people, heal the sick, cast out demons, embrace the sinner and outcast, confront secular and religious leaders and, most of all, embrace the will of the Father in all things, even to the point of dying as a criminal on a cross.

The Kingdom of God. Scholars tell us that the theme of Jesus' teaching and mission was the inauguration and proclamation of the Kingdom of God, sometimes also called the "reign of God" or the "kingdom of heaven." In Mk 1:15, Jesus says: "*This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.*"

The kingdom of God is not an earthly or territorial kingdom. It is a spiritual reality that exists wherever men and women embrace Jesus and his gospel vision of life. God's kingdom is "*a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, peace and love*" (Preface for *Solemnity of Christ the King*).

"The Kingdom of God is his presence among human beings calling them to a new way of life as

individuals and as a community. This is a Kingdom of salvation from sin and a sharing in divine life. It is the Good News that results in love, justice, and mercy for the whole world. The Kingdom is realized partially on earth and permanently in heaven. We enter this Kingdom through faith in Christ, baptismal initiation into the Church, and life in communion with all her members" (USC p. 79-80).

In Lk 13:18-19, Jesus says: "*What is the kingdom of God like? To what can I compare it?*" Then he goes on to compare it to a mustard seed that grows into a large bush. Jesus created several parables to reveal to us something of the nature of the reign of God. In Mt 13:44-46, Jesus says: "*The reign of God is like a treasure buried in a field which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*" From these verses we can see that becoming part of God's kingdom is the most important decision one can make. It is worth giving up all so that one can be a part of God's kingdom.

To enter the kingdom of God, one has to undergo a radical change of mind and heart. In Mt 7:21, Jesus says: "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.*" While all were invited to join the kingdom—Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, saint, sinner and outcast—not all would accept. Ironically, the religious leaders who should have helped to open the hearts of their people to Jesus, very often resisted Jesus and his message. Others allowed the worries of the world and the lure of riches to distract them from embracing Jesus and his Word (Mk 4:15-18). Finally, the kingdom or reign of God will be brought to fulfillment when God gathers all humanity around his Son in union with the triune God (C 541-542).

Pause: What speaks to you or challenges you most in this section? Why?

Jesus as Teacher. The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as the New Moses coming to inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth—to give us a New Law or teaching intended to bring the teaching of the Old Testament to fulfillment (Mt 5:17). In all of Jesus' teaching, his *Sermon on the Mount* (Mt 5-7) holds a privileged place, and within the Sermon on the Mount, the *Beatitudes* (Mt 5:1-12) holds a special place. The radical nature of Jesus' teaching is found in his Great Sermon and in other parts of his Gospel.

For example, the truly blessed are not the powerful and rich but the little ones, the unimportant people,

the meek, the peacemaker, the compassionate. Those who wish to belong to the kingdom of God must be ready to forgive not once or twice but seventy times seven. They must understand the passing value of earthly possessions and be always ready to share them with the less fortunate. Leadership in God's kingdom is not an opportunity to dominate others but to serve them. Children of the kingdom must be ready to embrace the cross knowing that in laying down our lives, we gain abundant life.

Pause: What words of Jesus do you find most comforting? What words do you find most challenging?

Miracles and exorcisms. *Jesus accompanied his words with signs and miracles to bear witness to the fact that the kingdom is present in him, the Messiah.* (Compendium Catechism of the Catholic Church # 108)

During his public ministry, Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, calmed mighty storms, walked on water, and cast out demons. In and through these mighty deeds, Jesus was communicating many things:

- Jesus' miracles and exorcisms were a tangible sign that the kingdom or reign of God had come into the world in the person of Jesus, the long awaited Messiah. In *John's Gospel*, miracles of Jesus are called *signs*, signs of a deeper reality. For example, the miracle of the loaves and fishes (Jn 6:1-15) is a sign of God's abundance and of Jesus' desire and readiness to satisfy the spiritual hunger of people.
- Miracles, healings and exorcisms were a sign of God's compassion for suffering people and of God's desire to bring wholeness to their lives. When Jesus healed lepers, it was a sign of God's desire to restore the outcast to society and to their communities.
- Miracles, healings and exorcisms were also a sign of Jesus' power over sickness, death, nature and evil.

Pause: What is your favorite miracle story in the Gospel? Why?

Jesus - fully human, fully divine (C 464-483, USC 81-83)

The unique and singular event of the Incarnation of the Son of God does not mean that Jesus Christ is part God and part man, nor does it imply that he is the result of confused mixture of the divine and the human. He became truly man while remaining truly God (C 464).

Fully human. Nine months after his conception, Jesus was born just like any other baby. He *gradually developed* in his human nature. He had to learn to walk and talk and learn all the other human skills. He had a normal human body with five senses. He got hungry, thirsty, laughed, cried, felt pain. He had a human soul which possessed an intellect and will. Jesus had human emotions like we do. He had DNA, genes, chromosomes, etc. Only in his divine nature did he enjoy divine powers, such as the ability to walk on water, multiply bread, give sight to the blind, raise the dead.

His divine nature did not give him a "leg up" on us when it came to dealing with human difficulties like grief, fear, rejection. His temptations not to follow God's will were real; otherwise, they would not have been true temptations. In Heb 4:15-16, we read these words: "*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin.*"

Fully divine. Even though Jesus possessed a divine nature from the moment of his conception in the womb of Mary, no one knows for certain at what point in his life Jesus became aware that he was the eternal Son of God. We can say that he did know during his public ministry. In Mt 11:27, Jesus says: "*All things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him.*"

In Jn 8:58, Jesus says: "*I tell you solemnly, before Abraham ever was, I AM.*" The term "*I AM*" was reserved for God (Ex 3:14). Jesus' Resurrection from the dead is of course the great testimony of his divinity. Billions of people throughout history have staked their belief in the divinity of Christ on this event.

Pause: What events in Jesus' life manifest his humanity? How might a passionate belief in the humanity of Christ impact one's prayer life and relationship with Jesus?

The struggle to protect an important truth and express it in human language. As Christianity spread and developed, some people in the community started to question the true identity of Christ. A priest call Arius denied the divinity of Christ, teaching instead that Jesus was the "adopted" Son of God. He had a *similar* substance to God the Father, but *not* the *same* substance. This heresy called *Arianism* was very widespread in the fourth century and embraced by many bishops, priests and laity.

Another heresy called *Docetism* denied the *humanity* of Christ. It maintained that Jesus only pretended to be human. Early church councils (Nicaea, Chalcedon & Constantinople) met to deal with doctrinal issues, like the true identity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity. Long debates and theological battles took place as theologians and bishops fought over the identity of Christ.

Finally, those who believed that Jesus was fully and truly human and fully divine won the day. Then they were faced with the unenviable challenge of finding human language to express the mystery of Christ's humanity and divinity. The *Nicene Creed*, which was written at the Councils of Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 381, is one of the first attempts of our Church leaders to express the inexpressible. This is the Creed that we recite every Sunday at Mass.

It is important to state that creeds and other doctrinal statements that deal with the mysteries of our faith are *not* an attempt to *explain* a particular doctrine, but rather they are statements of faith intended to *protect* the faith of the Church. If anyone teaches anything contrary to our creedal formulations, they are regarded as false teachers or heretics. Having said that, we can also say that it is the challenge of theologians in every age to find new and fresh ways to *express* in human language the truths of our faith.

Pause: What is your favorite image of Jesus in the gospels? Why?

Names and titles of Jesus (C 430-455)

In the Scriptures, we notice that the second person of the Blessed Trinity is given several names and titles. Let's look briefly at some of them and see what they tell us about Jesus and his mission.

Jesus. The name Jesus comes from a Hebrew word which means "God saves" or "God is salvation." At the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel gave this name to Mary—a name which reveals to us Jesus' mission, namely, to save humanity from sin and death.

Christ. Christ means "Anointed One" of God or *Messiah*. The Messiah was the anointed one through whom all God's promises made through the prophets were fulfilled.

Lord. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the title Adonai (Hebrew for Lord) referred to God. As Christians became aware of Jesus' divinity, they started to call him *Lord*.

Son of God, Son of Man. Jesus is the unique Son of God. "*The Father and I are one*" (Jn 10:30). The title "Son of Man" is borrowed from Dan 7:13 which means two things: the humanity of Christ and his role as Judge and Savior through whom God will fully establish his kingdom at the end of time.

Suggestions for action

1. This week, confine your prayer to the Second Person of the Trinity.
2. As you go about your daily work and chores, talk to Jesus and check to see if you really believe that he appreciates everything you are going through.

MEDITATION

Christ, the Son of God made man, is the Father's one, perfect, and unsurpassable Word. In him he has said everything; there will be no other Word than this one. St. John of the Cross, among others, commented strikingly on Heb 1:1-2: *In giving us his Son, his only Word (for he possesses no other), he spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word—and he has no more to say....because what he spoke before to the prophets in parts, he has now spoken all at once by giving us the All Who is His Son. Any person questioning God or desiring some vision or revelation would be guilty not only of foolish behavior but also of offending him, by not fixing his eyes entirely upon Christ and by living with the desire for some other novelty.*

(Catechism of the Catholic Church, 65)

*As I begin this day
become flesh again in me, Father.
Let your timeless and everlasting love
live out this sunrise to sunset
within the possibilities and impossibilities
of my own, very human life.
Help me to become Christ to my neighbor,
food to the hungry, health to the sick,
friend to the lonely, freedom to the enslaved,
in all my daily living.*

(J. Barrie Shepherd)

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