

CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE

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CHAPTER 4 – THE INCARNATION (Part One)

Now we look at the Second Article of the Creed - “AND IN JESUS CHRIST HIS ONLY SON OUR LORD”. Once again, of course, we are dealing with a mystery so we must not expect to find rational grounds for what is being revealed. Yet, aided by faith, we can readily accept it, since it is revealed to us by God who is TRUTH ITSELF. The doctrine we are examining is called the INCARNATION - a word which means the “becoming flesh” of God - the fact that God the Son became a man.

We are going to look at **what** the incarnation means and **why** it happened. Then, later, we shall deal with **how** it happened.

What we mean when we talk of the Incarnation is that God the Son, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Eternal God, at a certain moment in time became a man - yet without ceasing to be God. He was, therefore, both God and Man. We say that in the One Divine Person, Jesus Christ, there are two natures. The nature of GOD which He shared with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and the nature of MAN which He holds in common with all of us.

It would be helpful at this point, if we cleared our minds about what we mean by the words “NATURE” and “PERSON”. Supposing I was to point at someone and say “who is that?” the answer would be JOHN SMITH or MARY JONES or whoever - a unique person. There may be hundreds of John Smiths and Mary Jones in the world but none of them would be this particular John Smith or Mary Jones. The PERSON, then, is unique. On the other hand, if I were to point at someone and say rather rudely “WHAT is that?” the answer would be quite different - NOT John Smith or Mary Jones but “a human being” - one of millions. So the question “WHO?” indicates a PERSON - someone altogether unique. Whereas “WHAT?” indicates a NATURE - something we all have in common. Notice there is only one answer in each case - “John Smith” for person and “Human Being” for nature. If however we were able to point at Jesus Christ and ask the question “Who is that?” We would get one answer - “Jesus Christ”. But if we were to ask “WHAT is that?” we would get TWO answers - GOD and MAN and both would be equally true because, as the Creed puts it, Jesus Christ is TRUE GOD and TRUE MAN.

So, Jesus Christ is God the Son, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity and equal to both the Father and the Holy Spirit. He is also Son of Mary, a real human being like each one of us. The name JESUS comes to us through Greek and Latin from a Hebrew word meaning SAVIOUR. And CHRIST, again coming to us through Greek and Latin from Hebrew, meaning ANOINTED ONE. So CHRIST JESUS means exactly what He IS - THE ANOINTED SAVIOUR.

So far we have examined WHAT revelation has to tell us about the Incarnation. Now we ask the question WHY? Why did God go to the almost incredible length of stepping down to our level and becoming one of us? What possible need could there be for such a move on his part? To answer that question we must go back to the dawn of human history. Reason cannot answer it for us so we have to turn to revelation. God has told us why. Reason can, however, give us a hint by asking the questions “How could God, who is utterly good allow evil?” and “Could He not have made a better world?” The answer is He could and did - and man undid all the good!

So now we come to examine the mystery of THE FALL and being a mystery we have to rely on revelation. The account of the fall given in the Book of Genesis was written centuries after the event. To us now it seems both unscientific and unhistoric - points that would have seemed unimportant to the people of that time.

Through His Church, God has revealed that man was once very different to what he is now. He was in full control of himself and lacking that inner conflict between higher and lower, good and bad that we are all so familiar with. St. Paul most movingly describes it in a passage in his letter to the Romans (Rom.7:15-25). The Genesis account describes SIN as “eating the forbidden fruit” - a term we still use today to describe doing something wrong. What the sin actually was is not really important. The temptation was “So you will be like God” - in other words ABOVE the law, deciding for oneself what is right and what is wrong. Are we not aware of that sometimes in ourselves and others?

Anyway, man disobeyed God (ORIGINAL SIN) and the results were simply catastrophic - complete loss of control of himself and death and suffering entered the world. So man offended God but why was the Incarnation necessary? Before the fall, man was in what we call the state of ORIGINAL JUSTICE, sharing in God’s life, enjoying His friendship, able to do what God wanted of him - things which, without God’s grace, he would simply have been unable to do and these were the very things he needed to do to inherit his eternal reward. Now since when he fell he lost God’s grace, he could not pass on to his descendants what he no longer possessed - GRACE and the ability to do what God wanted of him - SUPERNATURAL acts.

The word ‘supernatural’ is usually misused nowadays to describe natural phenomena. The word SUPER comes from the Latin and means ABOVE so for instance if we were to imagine a dog that could write letters and discuss politics we would be thinking of a SUPERNATURAL dog because it is ABOVE the nature of a dog to write and talk. So, following The Fall, the entire human race was destined to be born lacking the one essential thing to enable each one of them to get to heaven. They were enslaved - in pawn - they were in need of a Saviour - a Redeemer - and they were told, through the prophets, that one day ONE would come to redeem them.

So man has offended God and is unable to make up for it. Man is enslaved by sin and needs to be saved from it. Now we shall see how God becoming man provides the answer to everything. Reason can help us here. We measure the gravity of an offence by the importance of the person who has been offended. To strike one’s neighbour is wrong, to strike a priest is worse, since he is a person dedicated to God and to strike the Pope would be worse still. Now with sin, it is GOD who is offended and God is of course, INFINITE. In that respect, therefore, all sin of any kind is infinite in malice since it is an offence against an infinite person.

Now, man though capable of committing this infinite offence, sin, is absolutely incapable of repairing the damage, or making satisfaction as we usually say. Only a DIVINE person, GOD, can make adequate satisfaction for an offence given to God. So, GOD became a MAN ..then, since He is GOD He can make infinite satisfaction by His death on the cross and since He is also MAN He can make satisfaction on behalf of his fellow men. Now we can see how appropriate the Incarnation was!

Over the centuries there have been many HERESIES - errors regarding the truth. The truth is delicately balanced - Jesus Christ is TRUE God yet also TRUE man. An exaggeration of one half causes the other half to suffer. Thus, if one exaggerates the DIVINITY of Our Lord, His HUMANITY suffers. In the fifth century the MONOPHYSITES said He was NOT truly a man. He was truly God but only a phantasm or apparition. If this had been so, then the satisfaction on behalf of men would have been lacking since He wasn’t a man. The NESTORIANS (also dating from the fifth century) put forward the opposite error - one which is very common today. They said that Jesus Christ was truly man but not God - merely a very holy man. If this had been so, then the satisfaction made by his death on the cross would have been inadequate and God’s justice would not have been satisfied. No. The only way in which God’s justice could be adequately satisfied and man restored once more to grace was the way it actually happened. Jesus Christ, God the Son, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity and, like the Father and the Holy Spirit, eternally God, who had no beginning, at a certain moment in time became a man, like us in all things but sin, so that as MAN He could make satisfaction on behalf of us all and that satisfaction was infinite because He was also God.

The following are relevant paragraphs (no.73-78) from the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (in question and answer format):

How should we understand the reality of sin? Sin is present in human history. This reality of sin can be understood clearly only in the light of Divine Revelation and above all in the light of Christ the Saviour of all. Where sin abounded, He made grace abound all the more.

What was the fall of the angels? This expression indicates that Satan and the other demons, about which Sacred Scripture and the Tradition of the Church speak, were angels created good by God. They were transformed into evil because with a free and irrevocable choice they rejected God and His Kingdom thus giving rise to the existence of hell. They try to associate human beings with their revolt against God. However, God has wrought in Christ a sure victory over the Evil One.

What was the first human sin? When tempted by the devil, the first man and woman allowed trust in their Creator to die in their hearts. In their disobedience they wished to become 'like God' but without God and not in accordance with God (Genesis 3:5). Thus Adam and Eve immediately lost for themselves and for all their descendants the original grace of holiness and justice.

What is original sin? Original sin, in which all human beings are born, is the state of deprivation of original holiness and justice. It is a sin 'contracted' by us not 'committed'; it is a state of birth and not a personal act. Because of the original unity of all human beings, it is transmitted to the descendants of Adam 'not by imitation, but by propagation'. This transmission remains a mystery which we cannot fully understand.

What other consequences derive from original sin? In consequence of original sin human nature, without being totally corrupted, is wounded in its natural powers. It is subject to ignorance, to suffering, and to the dominion of death and is inclined towards sin. This inclination is called 'concupiscence'.

After the first sin, what did God do? After the first sin the world was inundated with sin but God did not abandon man to the power of death. Rather, He foretold in a mysterious way in the 'Protoevangelium' (Genesis 3:15) that evil would be conquered and that man would be lifted up from his fall. This was the first proclamation of the Messiah and Redeemer.