

CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE

by Fr. John Ramsay

CHAPTER 5 - THE INCARNATION (Part Two)

Now we examine how the Incarnation took place, focusing our attention on the HUMANITY of Our Lord - seeing that He was indeed truly a man. The Third Article of the Creed says “WHO WAS CONCEIVED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT, BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY”. This means that God the Son took a body and soul like ours in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Only one human being was involved - Our Lady. The Holy Spirit took the place of the human father. Our Lord had no human father: St. Joseph was merely his foster father.

The devotion to Our Lady expressed by Catholics sometimes disturbs and upsets our friends outside the Church. If, however, the doctrine of the Incarnation in its fullness is understood and accepted, then that devotion is entirely understandable. And that doctrine is that the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, God the Son took his human nature from Our Lady. Flesh of her flesh, bone of her bone. He was NOT a phantasm: He was a genuine man: yet He is God. I used the expression “a body and soul like ours” - Man is composed of body and soul: he is what philosophers call a rational animal and Jesus Christ was just that. He was truly human. Thus He experienced THIRST...HUNGER...EXHAUSTION..., He showed ANGER at hypocrisy, FEAR in Gethsemani, SORROW at the death of Lazarus, his friend and He experienced a FEELING OF HAVING BEEN ABANDONED as He was dying on the cross and all this because He was, as everybody knew “the Son of Mary”.

That is why, in the year AD 431, one of the earliest Councils of the Church, the Council of Ephesus said, when defending the HUMANITY of Our Lord against the Monophysites (who claimed He was God but only a phantasm) that He was truly son of Mary and consequently Mary was rightly to be called “Mother of God”. If Jesus Christ were NOT truly God, then clearly Mary could not be called “Mother of God”. On the other hand if Jesus Christ were God but NOT TRULY MAN, then Mary was not a mother at all! As the Council said, Jesus Christ is TRULY GOD and TRULY MAN: He took his human nature from Mary, so Mary is rightly called Mother of God. So, Jesus Christ became a man. Early efforts to date his birth at the beginning of the period we now call “A.D.” are slightly out - experts now settle for a slightly earlier date -4 to -6 B.C. We know He died about 30 AD so He lived for 33 years or so. The important facts are that He was born, lived and died. The exact year is really of secondary importance.

From the Gospels we know a great deal about what He said and did in the last three years - His PUBLIC life. Remarkably little is mentioned about His earlier years: so, for instance, St. Matthew’s Gospel tells us of His birth and the flight into Egypt. St. Mark and St. John say nothing and St. Luke tells of the birth, circumcision, presentation and finding in the temple. Then, after His return to Nazareth with Mary and Joseph, we hear nothing till the coming of John the Baptist - 18 years of silence! These 18 years or “HIDDEN YEARS” as they are usually called, have great significance for us. We have here a classic example of an “argument from silence”. So much can be implied by simply saying nothing. So here we have the four Gospel accounts. Two of them (Mark and John) write nothing at all while the other two (Matthew and Luke) only mention the few incidents I described and NONE of them writes of the 18 hidden years. And all this despite the fact that they could easily discover all they wanted from His family and friends, YET THEY WRITE NOTHING. They are fairly shouting a message at us! “We have written nothing because there was NOTHING REMARKABLE TO WRITE!” In other words, Jesus Christ lived exactly as anybody else of his age and background would have lived at that time and in that place.

What is there in that for us? Just think! He remained God so everything He did was done by God, which gives all these ordinary activities a totally new dignity and value! This means He swept floors..., made beds... washed dishes... worked in a carpenter’s shop; He ate... drank... slept... and all these things have a new dignity because He did them! Hence, of course, the dignity of work which the Church is always reminding us of. We are too inclined to think that in order to please God we have to say prayers or else do some “good works”. This is not so. To do anything He did, even the humblest and most menial job, pleases God because they were done before us by Jesus Christ.

So far, we have looked at the birth and hidden years. Now let us look at the suffering and death of Our Lord. The Fourth article of the Creed says: **SUFFERED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE, WAS CRUCIFIED, DEAD AND BURIED.**” The account of the sufferings of Our Lord or Passion as they are usually called and of His death on the cross, like the hidden years, underline the **HUMANITY** of Our Lord. Thus it was a **MAN** who suffered the **SWEAT OF BLOOD** in Gethsemani: it was a **MAN** who was first **SCOURGED** and then **CROWNED WITH THORNS**: it was a **MAN** who **CARRIED THE CROSS** from the Praetorium to Calvary where He was crucified between two thieves and finally it was a **MAN** who, after three hours agony on the cross, during which time He pardoned his executioners, promised the reward of eternal life to the good thief and commended us all in the person of St. John to His Blessed Mother, **BOWED HIS HEAD AND DIED.**

We say that all these sufferings were endured by Jesus Christ to atone for our sins to purchase eternal life for us. Those who deny the **HUMANITY** of Our Lord and say He is God but not really a man - just a phantasm, expect us to believe that all these tortures were inflicted by the soldiers on a phantasm and not a real man at all! Moreover, since the sufferings would then be merely apparent, they would, of course, have no value at all. **NO.** As we often say the **BLOOD** of Christ was the price of our redemption - real blood and real redemption.

By the way, the **SIGN OF THE CROSS** that Catholics so often make is a highly significant act - not only is it an act of **FAITH** in the Trinity because we say “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” but, by tracing the cross upon ourselves we remind ourselves that Jesus Christ died on a cross for us.

Having dealt with the fourth article of the Creed which concentrates on the humanity we now turn our attention to the Fifth Article of the Creed which emphasises the **DIVINITY** of Our Lord. It goes like this, if you remember: “**HE DESCENDED INTO HELL, THE THIRD DAY HE ROSE AGAIN FROM THE DEAD.**” Just as the sufferings and death of Our Lord emphasised His **HUMANITY** - He could not have suffered and died if He were not a man - So His resurrection from the dead demonstrates His **DIVINITY** since He could not raise Himself to life if He wasn't the **LORD OF LIFE - GOD.** Throughout His public life He kept hinting at Who He was and claiming that after His death He would rise again. To have said so too plainly and too soon would have proved too much for his apostles to grasp and would also have resulted in his execution for blasphemy before He was ready.

So He often referred to God as His Father, worked numerous miracles or “signs” as St. John called them, to support His claim to be God - feeding thousands... calming the storm... healing the sick... raising the dead... gradually bringing the apostles to the point where Simon Peter confessed “**YOU ARE THE CHRIST: THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD**” which brought the immediate response “Simon, son of Jonah you are a happy man! Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but **MY FATHER IN HEAVEN**”.

At the Transfiguration He gave three of them a glimpse of His glory to bolster their faith before His coming crucifixion and then warned them to be silent about it “until the Son of Man **IS RISEN FROM THE DEAD**”.

The resurrection was the last and greatest of the signs - the proof of His divinity. It was **THIS** message that the apostles carried to the ends of the known world and, in defence of the **TRUTH** of that message, they laid down their lives.

What the apostles started, the Church continues. The whole life of the Church is centred round the resurrection so, of course. **SUNDAY** and not Saturday (the old Sabbath) is the sacred day and Easter not Christmas is the most important feast.

Throughout history God gave remarkable powers to certain chosen people but those powers died with them. Had Christ been merely a man so would His powers have died with Him. But, being God, He could not die - His enemies merely destroyed His human life but as God, He lived on and raised Himself to life again after three days. For those three days the Fifth Article says He “**DESCENDED INTO HELL**” - that statement needs clarifying. “**HELL**” here does not mean where the damned are separated from God for all eternity, but the place where the just who had died before Our Lord's day awaited Him to free them, through His death, from the consequences of their sins and admit them to heaven.

Man was redeemed by the death of Jesus Christ but not BEFORE it. Unlike us, who 19 centuries after, can say “if I do what is right and repent of my sins, I shall be saved”, they had to live out their lives in expectation of the coming of the Redeemer. They had to wait until He died to receive the reward of their good deeds. How grateful we should be that no such delay awaits us! All that can delay us is the consequence of our sins - what greater incentive than that can we have to repent of our past sins and to avoid sin in the future?