



SESSION 6

Born of the Virgin Mary



Detail from *The Nativity with the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel*, Duccio di Buoninsegna

SESSION OBJECTIVES

- To imagine and appreciate the concrete, historical reality of God becoming man
- To discover how the Gospels highlight the historical details of Christ's birth
- To see the humble place of Jesus' birth and what it teaches us about God
- To learn how the Church has come to understand Jesus as both true God and true man

STEP 1: Begin

OPENING PRAYER

Blessed be God.

Blessed be his holy Name.

Blessed be Jesus Christ, true God and true Man.

Blessed be the name of Jesus.

Blessed be his most Sacred Heart.

Blessed be his most Precious Blood.

—From The Divine Praises

INTRODUCTION

The unique and altogether 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 a confused mixture of the divine and the human. He became truly man while remaining truly God. Jesus Christ is true God and true man. (CCC 464)

We tend to overuse words like “unique” and “singular.” But it would be hard to find a more appropriate use than when the *Catechism* uses the words to describe the Incarnation: without loss to his divinity, God became man; Jesus Christ is true God and true man. The beginning of John’s Gospel presents this event with both beauty and astonishment: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only-begotten Son from the Father” (John 1:14). This astonishment and appreciation continue in the Church’s life today.

How can we rediscover or strengthen this sense of astonishment and appreciation in our own lives? What do Christians claim when it comes to the Incarnation? And what fruits come from meditating on the mystery of the Incarnation, Jesus Christ, true God and true man?

This session completes our ongoing consideration of who Jesus is. Born of the Virgin Mary, Jesus entered into history as a humble baby, true man; but he is also true God, the second Person of the Holy Trinity. The early Church contemplated and revered both dimensions of Jesus Christ. She sought to better understand our Savior, to express this understanding in the doctrine of the Incarnation, and to uphold and defend the mystery of Jesus’ identity.

STEP 2: Learn

SETTING THE STAGE

Saint Mary Major Basilica is one of the four great churches in Rome called major basilicas. The pope specially designates certain churches as basilicas, giving them unique privileges. They occupy a special place because they are closely affiliated with the pope and therefore outrank all other churches. But the reason for our visit to this specific basilica has less to do with its preeminence and more to do with humility. Below the altar, a crypt houses a relic of the crib, or manger, of Jesus. To be confronted with this fragment of wood is to come face to face with the historical reality, the grittiness, and the humility of how God became man in the Incarnation.

What did Jesus actually bring, if not world peace, universal prosperity, and a better world? What has he brought? The answer is very simple: God. He has brought God.

— Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, 44



God becomes man so that man can become like God, sharing in God's life through grace. But what does it mean to say that God becomes man? Does God really enter into history? And how can faith seek to understand better the remarkable event of the Incarnation? Jesus is truly God, one Person of the blessed Trinity, and he truly became man—at one moment of history, in one small place on this Earth. He shares our human nature, and he knows our human experience, but he remains free from all sin. So we can turn to him, knowing that he will understand us and trusting that he redeems us—because he is Almighty God, perfect man, and sinless Savior.

- I. The distinctive sign of Christian faith: God became man and thus entered into history**

- II. Salvation History: The incredible story of the Gospels—"Is this true?"—Yes, it's all true**
 - A. Old Testament prophecies make Jesus the only figure in history who was preannounced
 - B. The incredible twist in the story of salvation is that God became one of us to save us
 - C. The Gospels emphasize the historical reality of Christ, born of the Virgin Mary
 - D. Jesus is the Son of God—in eternity with the Father and as the divine-human king over all creation

- III. Pilgrimage: A relic of Christ's crib reminds us of history and of the holy land—The Cave of Saint Joseph**
 - A. The caves under the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem remind us of Christ's humble birth
 - B. The place of Christ's birth was confirmed by Emperor Hadrian in trying to "cancel" Christmas
 - C. The Creator of all comes into the world, into Israel, to a tiny town of Bethlehem, and, into a cave
 - D. In humility, the Virgin Mary gives birth in a humble cave and places Jesus in a feeding trough

- IV. Catechesis: The mystery of the Incarnation—fully human, fully God**
 - A. Why did God become man? Because of love
 1. Christ shares in our nature, satisfies the debt created by our sin, and restores us to life
 - B. Out of love, God wanted to heal our sin and restore us to communion with him
 - C. Original Sin distances us from God, and communion with him exceeds our nature
 - D. The Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon articulate the central tenets of the Incarnation
 1. In the fullness of time, the second Person of the Trinity, the Son, took on a human nature in the womb of Our Lady
 2. This means that Christ is one Divine Person with two natures, human and divine
 - E. Through his Incarnation, death, and Resurrection, Christ redeems us from sin and elevates us to supernatural life as adopted sons and daughters of God

- V. *Lectio divina*: Isaiah 9:2–7**
 - A. Isaiah promises more than an earthly savior, more than an earthly triumph
 - B. He promises the coming of a child, but one who has divine power and authority
 - C. We find his power, authority, and kingdom not in worldly things, but in his teaching, counsel, humility, and peace

WORD MEANING:

Incarnation

The doctrine of God becoming man in order to save us—as Scripture says, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). More precisely, the second Person of the Trinity—the Son—assumed a human nature in the womb of the Virgin Mary to become human, while remaining divine, and to bring about our salvation.

Nothing was more needed for raising our hopes and delivering the minds of mortals ... than a demonstration of how much value God put on us and how much he loved us. And what could be clearer and more wonderful evidence of this than ... the Son of God, unchangeably good ... electing to enter into partnership with our nature without detriment to his own?

— Saint Augustine, *On the Trinity*, XIII.13

STEP 3: Engage

- 1) God is all-powerful, so he could have saved us in many other ways than by becoming man. Yet he chose the route of Incarnation. He prepared his people for his arrival in the Old Testament and then entered into history at a particular time and place, as the Gospels make clear. What reasons might he have had for choosing this route? And what do these reasons teach us about God?

For this discussion, both Scripture and ordinary reason, informed by faith, come into play. Various stories from the Old Testament might be helpfully mentioned, as these suggest that God wants to draw close to his people, while also approaching them gently, gradually. Over time, he helps them to understand better who he is and, in this way, also prepares them for his coming in the flesh. God's entrance into history brings this well-prepared approach to its climactic moment: the God who wants to draw close does so in the most intimate way possible by becoming one of us, spending time on this earth with his disciples, and remaining with us in his Church even after his Ascension into heaven. The Gospels highlight the concrete nature of the Incarnation and of the time Jesus spent with his closest disciples, the crowds, and others. When we consider why God would do this, our reason confirms what Scripture elsewhere makes clear: God draws close and even comes to dwell among us because he loves us, and a lover longs to spend time with his or her beloved. We might solidify this line of reasoning by imagining that God instead just snapped his fingers, saved us, and then communicated that information through a prophet. We'd be saved, of course, but what would we be missing? We'd miss that remarkable time when God actually

Leader

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walked this earth, entered into communion with us, exemplified what human life and friendship should look like, and, above all, visibly and concretely demonstrated his love for us, throughout the whole of his life but especially in the sacrifice of the Cross.

- 2) Before seeing the cave of Saint Joseph, had you thought about Christ's birth in such detail? When you think through these humble surroundings, the God who chose to be born there, and the maiden who said yes to these circumstances, how do these details enrich or change your understanding of God, of Jesus, and of Mary?

This question offers a chance to exchange thoughts on the nitty-gritty reality of the Incarnation. Some might mention points of history, such as the reigning Roman emperor or the particular time of the census; others might speak to the lack of comforts in a cave or the challenge of giving birth in such surroundings; still others might reflect on Mary and Joseph and their obedience to God's will in the face of adversity. Such observations and thoughts can form a helpful meditation on the Christmas mystery, the Nativity of Christ, and how these teach us about God's plan, his condescension and humility, and the willingness of Mary and Joseph to follow wherever God led them. Ideally, the net result will be a greater appreciation of the reality and mystery of Christ's birth so that it might be a window to better understanding the God who did not shy away from lowering himself to join us in order to save us.

Leader

- 3) There's a popular phrase that contains some truth to it: "Be the best version of yourself." Many people live by this phrase, but it can obscure important truths related to why Jesus came into the world. What do you think is true about this phrase? And what might account for its popularity? What truths might it obscure, and how might it cloud our vision when it comes to the Incarnation?

This open-ended question allows different views to surface. The point is not to condemn the phrase, but to affirm its truth and usefulness while also preventing misunderstandings and honing our understanding of the Incarnation. First, this slogan helpfully affirms human agency in growing in virtue and holiness. Second, it also suggests that being good and being holy bring out the best in each of us; it isn't a matter of making ourselves into somebody we're not, but rather a question of being who we truly are, which means who we are at our best. But this phrase can also suggest we bootstrap our way to perfection: if I just try really hard and work really hard at it, I can become the real me, the best version of myself! What it leaves out of the picture are some central truths of the Incarnation. The first being that God became man because we need help; we need a Savior. We need help because we have sinned and we can't free ourselves from these chains on our own. But even beyond that, God is calling us to something so amazing that, even if we hadn't sinned, we still couldn't get there on our own. We need him to elevate us to new life in him, and Jesus came into the world to do just that, in addition to freeing us from sin. In other words, there's a paradox here. We certainly are invited and required to strive mightily to be the very best we

Leader

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can be; our agency is important. But in the end, the best version of ourselves means focusing less on ourselves and focusing more on Christ, who became Incarnate to save us from sin, elevate us to new life in him, and model for us how we ought to live our lives. We become who we ought to be by becoming more like Christ, and we do this only with his grace, his help.

STEP 4: Conclude

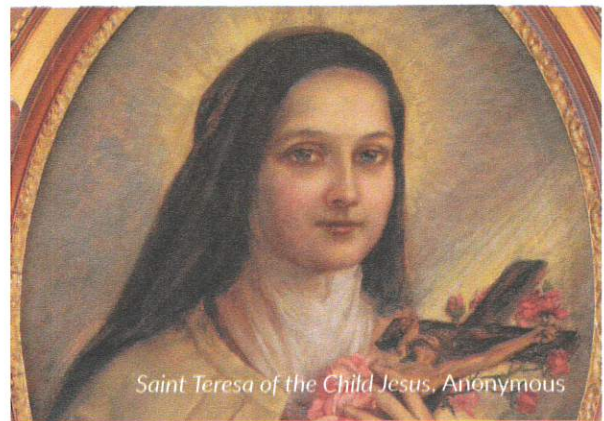
The unique and singular event of the Incarnation is a mystery that is rich in meaning; it truly lies at the center of our Christian faith. For this reason, we've now spent three sessions meditating on the mystery of Christ, the God-Man, who revealed himself to us in the Incarnation. We first reflected on Jesus as foretold by the Scriptures, focusing on his humanity. Then we explored the startling claim that Jesus is not only man, but also truly God. He is the only Son of God, who makes known to us that God is in himself a Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a communion of love. Lastly, we considered what it means for Jesus to be both God and man: born of the Virgin Mary. He is the crux of history, the Incarnate Lord.

As we've seen, Jesus Christ stands at the center of Christianity, and his dwelling among us is the distinctive sign of our faith. In many ways, the principal task of our lives is simply to know, love, and imitate the person of Jesus. This journey begins by rediscovering him in Scripture, encountering him daily in prayer, and striving to live each day as he did.

CLOSING PRAYER

O Jesus, whose adorable Face ravishes my heart, I implore Thee to fix deep within me Thy divine image and to set me on fire with Thy Love, that I may be found worthy to come to the contemplation of Thy glorious Face in Heaven.

—A prayer to Jesus, by Saint Thérèse of Lisieux



MEMORY VERSE

Christ Jesus ... emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

—PHILIPPIANS 2:5, 7-8

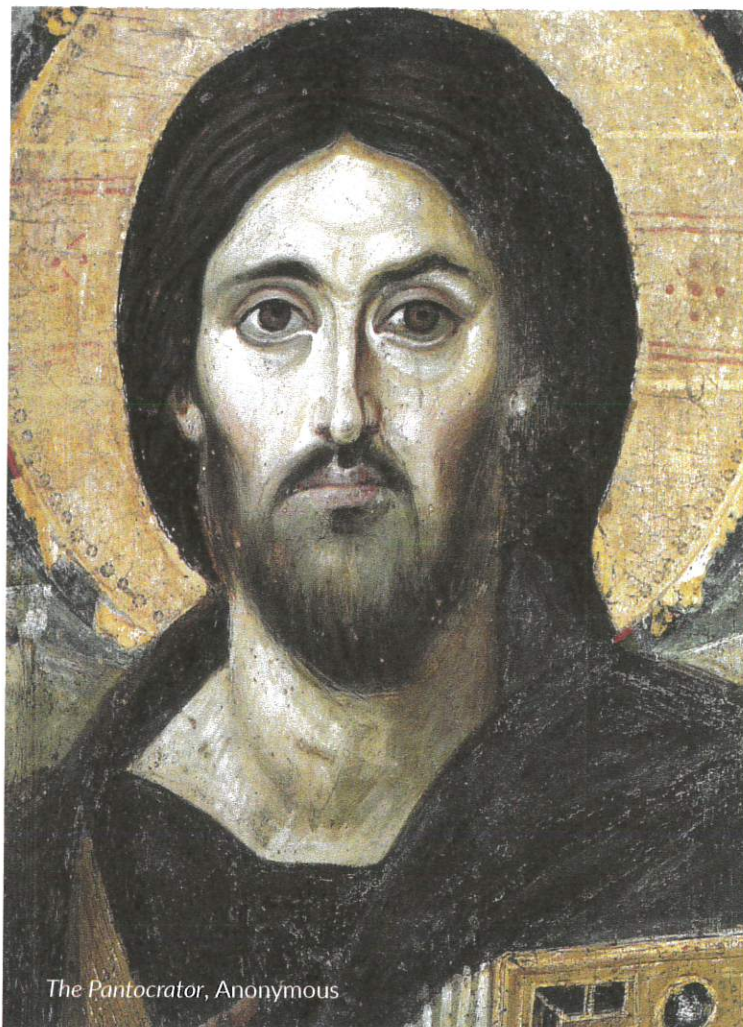
CALL TO CONVERSION

Debates about Christ's humanity and divinity went back and forth in the early Church. Some emphasized Jesus' humanity to the point of excluding his divinity; others focused on his divinity to the point of excluding his humanity. The best of the Church's theological tradition stood firmly on middle ground, upholding both the humanity and the divinity of Christ. As we saw earlier, this orthodox position was especially hammered out at the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon.

In our own lives of prayer and devotion, we also must work to hold together Christ's humanity and divinity in how we think about Jesus. We can be tempted to overemphasize his humanity. Viewing him as a friend, we might make Jesus too familiar, playing up how he understands us and how he is just like us, and downplaying his divine authority, the laws he gives, the high standard of discipleship he sets, and the reverence owed him. Alternatively, we might overaccentuate his divinity. Seeing him as Lord, we might overemphasize his distance and authority, making him altogether otherworldly, an unattainable ideal, and failing to appreciate his intimacy with us, his mercy, and his tenderness.

Jesus is, of course, both friend and Lord, because he is both human and divine. Both viewpoints are true, yet we can find it challenging to hold them together in how we think about Christ, how we pray to him, and how we speak of him to others.

How do you tend to view Jesus? Likely you do not view him exclusively one way or the other, but are you more inclined to think of him as a friend or as Lord? Do you see the Lord as someone close to you, someone understanding and accommodating? Or as someone who is Almighty, who calls us to a high standard and empowers us to attain it? Might you find other ways to characterize these two sides of Christ? How have you succeeded or failed to embrace both in the past? How might God be inviting you to hold the two more closely together in the future?



The Pantocrator, Anonymous

DIGGING DEEPER

The term “Incarnation” can sound like a technical theological term, but it’s more than that. It names a reality so great that we can scarcely comprehend it. It points to an event that Christians can meditate on for the whole of their lives, never exhausting it. What does it mean that God became man? It means many things, and we can, and should, spend our lives discovering the depths of its meaning.

To take a popular and fundamental example, Catholic devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus stems from and enriches the doctrine of the Incarnation. It is because the divine Son of God assumed human nature and became man that we speak of his Sacred Heart. As Pope Pius XII says, “The Heart of the Incarnate Word is deservedly and rightly considered the chief sign and symbol of that...love with which the divine Redeemer unceasingly loves His eternal Father and all mankind” (*Haurietis aquas*, no. 54). Meditating upon the Sacred Heart of Jesus also vivifies our understanding of the incarnate Lord. The *Catechism* expresses this poignantly:

Jesus knew and loved us each and all during his life, his agony, and his Passion and gave himself up for each one of us: “The Son of God ... loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). He has loved us all with a human heart. (CCC 478)



The Most Holy Trinity, Corrado Giaquinto

Jesus loves us—he loves you—with a love that is fully human, filled with tenderness and emotion. His is not a disembodied or otherworldly love—no, it is a love that is as warm and affectionate as that of mother for her child (see Isa 49:15). It is as moving and passionate as that of a lover for his beloved (see Song 2:8–13). At the same time, Jesus’ love is also fully divine, powerful, and effective.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus isn’t an addendum to the Christian faith; rather, it lies at the distinctive center of Christianity, flowing as it does from the mystery of the Incarnation. To consecrate ourselves to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is to acknowledge the truth and mercy of this love and to commit ourselves to returning love for love, through the grace of God.

FOR FURTHER READING

Hebrews 1–4

Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 456–478

Romano Guardini, *The Lord*

Pope Saint John Paul II, “Is Jesus the Son of God?” in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*

Ronald Knox, *The Creed in Slow Motion*, chap. 6