

d Pelagianism, the fifth-century heresy that taught that he can save himself without God's grace. Pelagius under-
sin and "reduced the influence of Adam's fault to bad
16). But the Church also rejected the teaching of Luther
ixteenth century that man is so bad ("totally depraved")
ly choose to cooperate with God's grace.

Chapter 5

JESUS CHRIST

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"I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead."

1. The centrality of Christ

In the Apostles' Creed, 65 percent of the words (seventy-three of 113) are about Christ. Why then is only 10 percent of this part on the Creed (one

chapter out of ten) about him? Not because Christ is only 10 percent of Christianity. He is 100 percent. Christ is the essence of Christianity. Pascal says: "Not only do we only know God through Jesus Christ, but we only know ourselves through Jesus Christ; we only know life and death through Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus Christ we cannot know the meaning of our life or our death, of God or of ourselves" (*Pensées* 417).

Why then is the gospel, or "good news", about Jesus Christ covered in only one chapter? Because we have four perfect supplements to it: the four Gospels in the New Testament.

Do you want to be a Christian? Then read the Gospels, for there you meet Christ.

Do you want to be a saint? Then read the Gospels, for they were the main spiritual food of all the saints. No human words ever written have come even close to equaling their power to change lives.

2. The distinctive doctrine of Christianity

What distinguishes Christianity from all other religions? The answer is simple: Christ himself. The essence of the Christian faith is in its first and shortest creed: "Jesus Christ is Lord [*Kyrios*, God]" (Phil 2:11). All Christians believe that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, God in human flesh. If they did not believe that, they would not be Christians. No non-Christians believe that; if they did, they would be Christians. "Belief in the true Incarnation of the Son of God is the distinctive sign of Christian faith" (CCC 463).

3. The message and the person

All other great religious teachers subordinated themselves to their message. They pointed away from themselves to their teachings. For instance, Buddha said, "Look not to me, look to my *dharma* [doctrine, teaching]." But Christ said, "Come to me" (Mt 11:28). Buddha said, "Be lamps unto yourselves." But Christ said, "I am the light of the world" (Jn 9:5). Moses and Muhammad claimed only to be prophets of God; Jesus claimed to be God (Jn 8:58).

Any other religion could survive the loss of its founder. If Muhammad or Buddha or Confucius were proved to be mythical and not historical figures, the religions that stem from them might still survive. But Christianity could never survive without Christ. For other religious founders only claimed to teach the truth; Christ claimed to be the Truth (Jn 14:6).

4. The essence of catechesis

"The transmission of the Christian faith consists primarily in proclaiming Jesus Christ in order to lead others to faith in him. From the beginning, the

first disciples burned with the desire to proclaim Christ: 'We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard' [Acts 4:20] (CCC 425). "'At the heart of catechesis'" [instruction in Christianity] "'we find, in essence, a Person' [CT 5]" (CCC 426). "In catechesis 'Christ . . . is taught—everything else is taught with reference to him' [CT 6]" (CCC 427).

5. The essential qualification for all Christian teachers

You cannot teach what you do not know. You cannot give what you do not have. The primary requirement for any Christian teacher, preacher, evangelist, or catechist is not just to know *about* Christ but to *know Christ*. "Whoever is called 'to teach Christ' must first seek 'the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus' [Phil 3:8]" (CCC 428).

6. Christ the supreme surprise

Throughout the biblical narrative, God takes the initiative, and reveals himself. It is a story not of man's search for God but of God's search for man. (C. S. Lewis says, "To speak of man's search for God is like speaking of the mouse's search for the cat" [*Surprised by Joy*].) And his acts always astonish us. They go "far beyond all expectation" (CCC 422). "God is the great iconoclast; the Incarnation leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins" (C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*). 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. (See Is 48:6–8.)

If it really happened, it is the greatest fact that ever entered the universe. If it did not really happen, then it is the greatest fantasy that ever entered the universe of human thought. Why do Christians believe it is a fact rather than a fantasy or myth?

The world was convinced and converted by the Incarnation. Not by arguments for it, but by it—or, rather, by him, by the concrete Person Jesus Christ. Even after he ascended, the world kept meeting him in the Gospels and in his saints and simply could not help falling in love with him. The gospel is a love story—the story of God's love for man. And the story of the world's conversion is also a love story—the story of man's love for this God.

They were not converted by the reasonableness of the story. The story is *not* reasonable. It is a story of crazy, passionate love that led the eternal

Creator, infinitely perfect and lacking nothing, to become a mortal man and suffer torture, death, and hell ("My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?") to save us rebels from our sins. Our sin was irrational, and his redemption was irrational too. We sinned for no reason but lack of love, and he redeemed us for no reason but excess of love. Our sin was sub-rational, his salvation was super-rational.

It is the heart that makes us accept the gospel, not just the head. The head understands what the heart must desire and believe. Tolkien says of the Gospels, "There is no tale that [good] men would rather believe is true." The unbeliever's only defensible defense against the gospel is that it is "too good to be true". Only the hard or despairing heart can look on that face on the Cross, know who that is, what he is doing, what love made him do it, and whose sin made it necessary, without melting.

7. The meaning of the Incarnation

But what does this astonishing thing—the "Incarnation"—mean?

It means that the second Person of the eternal Trinity, who is called the "Logos" or "Word" of God (Jn 1:1-3), became "flesh" (Jn 1:14), that is, added our human nature (body and soul) to his divine nature some two thousand years ago and was called "Jesus". That is the Incarnation looked at "from the top down", so to speak. Looked at from the bottom up, it means that this man Jesus is, in the words of the Nicene Creed recited at every Sunday Mass, "the only Son of God eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father. Through him all things were made."

8. The two natures of Christ

The Creed confesses that Christ is both conceived "by the power of the Holy Spirit" and "born of the Virgin Mary". This one Person has two natures: he is both fully divine and fully human.

This is a mystery and a paradox, but not a logical contradiction, not impossible. It is not one person and two persons, or one nature and two natures, but one person with two natures. Human nature itself contains a similar though not identical paradox. Each of us, though only one person, is both visible and invisible, tangible and intangible, material and spiritual at once, by having both body and soul.

"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" (CCC 464). He

is not half human and half divine, as a centaur is half human and half horse, or as Mr. Spock in *Star Trek* is half human and half Vulcan. The Church rejected all heresies that denied his full humanity (such as ancient Gnosticism or modern New Age versions of it) and all heresies that denied his full divinity (such as ancient Arianism or contemporary Modernism).

9. God as one in nature and three in Persons

God is one: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and [therefore] you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6:4-5). We are to give our all to him and no other precisely because he is all; there is no other God.

The doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity do not compromise God's oneness at all. Christianity is as monotheistic as Judaism or Islam. There is but one God.

But this one God is three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three are called God in the Bible. Scripture is our datum for the doctrine of the Trinity.

10. Christ as both God and the Son of God

Christ claimed to be God ("I AM", Jn 8:58) and accepted St. Thomas' worship of him as "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20:28).

But he also claimed to be the Son of God, whom he called his "Father". He received his teaching from his Father: "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me" (Jn 7:16). He prayed to his Father, obeyed his Father, and subordinated his will to his Father's: "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me" (Jn 6:38).

How can he be both God and God's Son?

Because the word "God" is used in two ways in Scripture: (a) "God" means the one Divine Being, who exists equally and totally in each Divine Person. (b) "God" also means the personal name for the Father, as distinct from Christ, who is the Son of God the Father.

11. The meaning of the names "Jesus" and "Christ"

"Jesus" (*Yeshua* or *Joshua*) means "Savior" or "God saves". This name was given at the command of God's angel: "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21).

"Christ" (*Christos* in Greek), or "Messiah" (*Mashiach* in Hebrew) means "the anointed one", that is, "the promised one", the one God promised through the prophets of his chosen people.

The promised Messiah was to have three offices, or functions: prophet, priest, and king (see Is 11:2; 61:1; Zech 4:14; 6:13; Lk 4:16–21).

But what kind of kingdom did Jesus establish to fulfill the prophecies and show that he was the Messiah? The prophets had promised that the Messiah would save God's people from their enemies. Many of the Jews in Jesus' day rejected Jesus as the Messiah because they looked for a worldly king who would save them from their worldly masters, the Romans, not realizing that their worst enemies, the ones he came to save them from, were their own sins and not realizing that his kingdom would be, not a political kingdom, but a kingdom "not of this world" (Jn 18:36).

Jesus' miracles were not meant to be the tools of a this-worldly salvation but signs of an otherworldly salvation. "By freeing some individuals from the earthly evils of hunger, injustice, illness, and death,¹ Jesus performed messianic signs. Nevertheless he did not come to abolish all evils here below,² but to free men from the greatest slavery, sin" (CCC 549). (The sharpest distinction between traditional, orthodox Catholicism and Modernist, "liberal", revisionist Catholicism is probably right here.) The Messianic promises in the prophets were deliberately ambiguous, to test people: those whose hearts were set on righteousness and salvation from sin recognized and accepted him as their Savior; those whose hearts worshipped other gods did not. The same is true today.

12. The meaning of the name "Son of God"

The Old Testament sometimes uses the term "sons of God" loosely to include angels and righteous men. But Jesus called himself the "only Son" of God (Jn 3:16). The Nicene Creed says he is "eternally begotten . . . , not made [created]."

A son has the same nature as his father. As the son of a man is a man, and the son of an ape is an ape, and the son of a Martian would be a Martian, so the Son of God is God.

He is both Son of God (thus divine) and Son of Man (thus human), for he has a divine Father from eternity and a human mother in time. The Virgin Birth shows both his divinity and humanity, conceived "by the power of the Holy Spirit" and "born of the Virgin Mary", "Son of the Father as to his divinity and naturally son of his mother as to his humanity"³ (CCC 503).

¹ Cf. Jn 6:5–15; Lk 19:8; Mt 11:5.

² Cf. Lk 12:13–14; Jn 18:36.

³ Council of Frituli (790): DS 619; cf. Lk 2:48–49.

13. The meaning of the name "Lord"

"Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil 2:11) is probably the earliest and shortest Christian creed. The name "Lord" is given to Jesus hundreds of times in the New Testament. It is clearly a divine title. "In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the ineffable Hebrew name YHWH" [I AM], "by which God revealed himself to Moses [cf. Ex 3:14], is rendered as *Kyrios*, 'Lord' . . . The New Testament uses this full sense of the title 'Lord' both for the Father and—what is new—for Jesus, who is thereby recognized as God Himself [cf. 1 Cor 2:8] (CCC 446).

"Throughout his public life, he demonstrated his divine sovereignty by works of power over nature, illnesses, demons, death, and sin" (CCC 447)—five miraculous signs of his divinity.

14. Only one Lord

A consequence of Christ's lordship is liberation from the idolatry of worshipping any earthly lord. "From the beginning of Christian history, the assertion of Christ's lordship over the world and over history has implicitly recognized that man should not submit his personal freedom in an absolute manner to any earthly power, but only to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Caesar is not 'the Lord'"⁴ (CCC 450). There is a higher law than human law and a higher Lord than human lords. There is only one absolute Lord: Christ, not Caesar or "society" or "public opinion" or "the spirit of the times" or all the authorities on earth. If Christ's Church is contradicted by all the powers of this world—as she was nineteen centuries ago and increasingly is again today—we must say, with St. Paul, "Let God be true though every man be false" (Rom 3:4).

Life is full of choices between lords. We will not be happy and Christ will not rest, until he is the lord of all: our time, our money, our bodies, our souls, our lives, our deaths.

15. Reasons for faith in Christ's divinity

The titles "Lord" (God) and "Savior" (from sin) come together in Jesus' claim to forgive sins—all sins, any sins, for every person, at every time in history. The Jewish religious authorities, hearing him do this, rightly asked, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mk 2:7). All sin is against God; that is why God alone can forgive all sins.

If Christ is not God, he is a blasphemous pretender. For he claimed to be

⁴ Cf. Rev 11:15; Mk 12:17; Acts 5:29.

God. He said such things as "I and the Father are one" (Jn 10:30) and "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am" (Jn 8:58). This claim forced men either to worship him as God (if they believed he spoke the truth) or to crucify him as the worst blasphemer in history (if they believed he did not speak the truth). Thus the earliest Christian apologists (defenders of the faith) argued that Christ must be "either God or a bad man." What nearly all non-Christians believe him to be—just a very good man—is the one thing he could not possibly be. For a mere man who says he is God is not a good man; he is either a liar or a lunatic. And if the Gospel records make it impossible to call this man either a liar or a lunatic, either a wicked blasphemer or a deranged egomaniac, then he is Lord. Not only faith but also logic forces us to our knees.

16. Why God became man

There are at least four reasons:

a. "The Word became flesh for us in order to save us" [from sin and its consequence, eternal separation from God] "*by reconciling us with God*, who 'loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation' [atonement] 'for our sins' [1 Jn 4:10; 4:14]; (CCC 457). 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. He came most fundamentally to die, to give his life for ours.

b. "The Word became flesh so that we might know God's love" (CCC 458; cf. Jn 3:16). Once you have heard this word—the word of divine love—in the most supernatural thing that ever happened, the Incarnation, you can then hear this same word in the most natural things as well, in the whisper of every breeze and the trickle of every brook. Every ray of sunlight becomes a ray of Sonlight; every creature becomes a little love letter when you recognize the Creator's big love letter that is Christ. We now know why he banged out the Big Bang billions of years ago: for the same reason he died on the Cross two thousand years ago: so that we might know him and his love for us.

c. "The Word became flesh to be our model of holiness" (CCC 459)—to show us, not just tell us (as he had done in the Mosaic law), what is the design and purpose of our life, what kind of person he made us to be. He came to show us our own ultimate identity; to reveal man to man as well as to reveal God to man.

d. Most incredibly of all, "The Word became flesh to make us '*partakers of the divine nature*' [2 Pet 1:4. . . ." "[T]he Son of God became man so that we might become" [sons of] "God's" "The only-begotten Son of God,

wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods.'⁶" He transforms our *bios* (natural life) into *zoē* (supernatural life).

"We are brethren" [of the God-man, of God] "not by nature, but by the gift of grace, because that adoptive filiation" [adopting us as his brothers] "gains us a real share in the life of the only Son" (CCC 654).

By nature we are created in God's image, or resemblance, as a statue is sculpted in the image of its sculptor, but we do not have God's life any more than a statue has the human life of its sculptor. What Christ called being "born anew" (Jn 3:3) is like the statue coming to life, to share not only the image and likeness of the sculptor, but his very life—like Pinocchio, transformed from mere wooden puppet to real boy, miraculously sharing the life of a boy: thinking, choosing, talking, playing. In St. Paul's terms, our destiny is to be not merely "flesh" (human nature) but "spirit", living off the life of the Holy Spirit. In St. Augustine's formula, the Holy Spirit becomes the life of our soul as the soul is the life of our body.

17. When God became man: "The fullness of time"

"The coming of God's Son to earth is an event of such immensity that God willed to prepare for it over centuries. He makes everything converge on Christ [Col 1:15-20]: all the rituals and sacrifices, figures and symbols of the 'First Covenant' [Heb 9:15]. He announces him through the mouths of the prophets who succeeded one another in Israel. Moreover, he awakens in the hearts of the pagans a dim expectation of this coming" (CCC 522) through their philosophers and poets and myth-makers (see Acts 17:16-28). He also providentially prepares the world for the spread of the gospel by unifying it as never before or since under a single Roman law, language, communications, transportation, and peace: the *pax Romana* was God's providential preparation for the *pax Christi*.

18. The universality of Christ and the salvation of non-Christians

Christ is the Savior of all men, without exception. "Everyone is called to enter the kingdom" (CCC 543). "The Church, following the apostles, teaches that Christ died for all men without exception: 'There is not, never has been, and never will be a single human being for whom Christ did not suffer'" (CCC 605).

⁵ St. Athanasius, *De inc.* 54, 3: PG 25, 192B.

⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Opusc.* 57: 1-4.

⁷ Council of Quiercy (853): DS 624; cf. 2 Cor 5:15; 1 Jn 2:2.

Jesus claims to be not only Savior but *the* Savior, the *only* Savior from sin and the only way to heaven (Jn 10:7; 14:6; Acts 4:12). This "exclusivism" invariably offends non-Christians. But the Church cannot water down his claim. She cannot revise Scripture. Her data are non-negotiable, because they are not man-made but God-given. She has no authority to correct her Lord's words.

However, she does have authority to interpret them. There are three interpretations of Christ's "narrow way" sayings, such as John 14:6 ("I am the way . . . no one comes to the Father, but by me"):

- a. The Church's traditional interpretation is Christocentric: one must have faith in Christ to be saved, but that faith may possibly be implicit or unclear or unaware of itself, as with the good, God-seeking pagan.
- b. The very narrow or fundamentalist interpretation is ecclesiocentric: one must have *explicit* faith in Christ and be in his *visible* Church to be saved.
- c. The very broad or liberal interpretation is theocentric without being Christocentric. It maintains that all who seek God in any way are saved, whether through Christ or not.

The Church does not teach the fundamentalist interpretation. The Church does teach that "outside the Church is no salvation". But she also teaches that this can refer to the invisible, or "mystical", Body of Christ, not just the visible Church, and that a just and loving God does not condemn those who through no fault of their own do not know that Christ and his Church are the means of salvation.

The Church bases her Christocentric interpretation on her data. The scriptural data tell us that Christ is the only Savior, but they do not tell us that those who call themselves Christians are the only ones saved.

If any are saved, they are saved by Christ. But Christ is divine as well as human. Many of the saved may not have known him on earth in his human incarnation, but only as the "Logos", the Truth, "the true light that enlightens every man" (Jn 1:9). Every man knows God innately, by reason and conscience and nature (Rom 1:19–20). And the only way to know God is through the light of truth that he gives us. And that light is the "Logos", the Word or Mind or Revelation of the Father. And that Logos is the Son of God. Therefore, everyone who knows God does so through the Son. Just as all who see the creation see it through the light of the sun, all who know the Creator know him through the light of the Son.

Who then are saved? We do not know who or how many. When his apostles asked him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" (Lk 13:23), he replied, "Strive to enter." He did not satisfy our curiosity about comparative population statistics of heaven and hell. What he did tell us is that he is the only Savior. If he is not what he claimed to be, then he is no Savior at all, but a liar, an egomaniac, a blasphemer, or a madman.

It remains to be seen what is wrong with the "liberal" interpretation. People often ask: If one can be saved without being a member of Christ's visible Church by being baptized, or even without explicitly believing in Christ, then why be a Catholic?

The answer is, first of all, because the Catholic faith is true! Surely this is the first and last reason to believe anything if you are honest. The very asking of the question is its own answer and refutation. For if anyone asks the question, he knows about the claims of Christ to be God and of the Catholic Church to be the one Church he founded, and he is now seeking an excuse to evade an honest confrontation with these claims.

A second, equally absolute reason is: because God gave us Christ, and you do not want to refuse God. And Christ gave us the Church, and you do not want to refuse Christ.

Third, because the Church gives us far more knowledge of Christ, and far more of God's sacramental graces that come from Christ, than anything else can. So it is more likely that you can be saved as a Catholic. The more complete the road map, the more likely it is that you will reach your destination.

19. Christ and the Jews

"In the magi" [the wise men from the East who followed the star to find Christ], "representatives of the neighboring pagan religions, the Gospel sees the first-fruits of the nations, who welcome the good news of salvation through the Incarnation: The magi's coming to Jerusalem . . . means that pagans can discover Jesus and worship him as Son of God and Savior of the world only by turning toward the Jews and receiving from them the messianic promise as contained in the Old Testament"⁸ (CCC 528).

Through Christ the Jews fulfill their destiny as the people chosen to show the true God to the world. In fact, half the world today worships the God of the Jews mainly because Christian missionaries made him known.

Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate* made clear that although "Jerusalem did not recognize God's holy moment when it came (cf. Lk 19:42)", the Jews remain very dear to God, and "neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during [Jesus'] passion. It is true that the Church is the new people of God, yet the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed" (NA 4). Rather, "sinners were the authors and the ministers of all the sufferings that the divine Redeemer endured"⁹ (CCC 598). The charge against him, the sign on his Cross, was

⁸ Cf. Jn 4:22; Mt 2:4–6.

⁹ Roman Catechism I, 5, 11; cf. Heb 12:3.