

The Incarnation

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth;
we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. ~ John 1:14*

FROM THE TRIUNE GOD, who is eternal and timeless (with no history or future), who is transcendent and mysterious and who is goodness and blessedness (full of grace and love), comes the Son, Jesus, who is God fully and really and who is made man fully and really. The Father, in keeping with his promise to send a redeemer for all humankind (see Gn 3:15), acted beyond all expectation — he sent us his own divine and beloved Son (see Mk 1:11). This coming to earth of the very Son of God, through the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is the Incarnation (that is, the “enfleshment”): the coming together of God and humanity in the person of Jesus.

The Son of God truly became man — an historical person. Born of the Virgin of Nazareth in the little town of Bethlehem during the reign of King Herod while Caesar Augustus ruled all of the Roman world (see Mt 2:1; Lk 2:1-7), he lived at Nazareth (see Lk 2:39), learned to be a carpenter like his earthly father Joseph (see Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3); and was even lost for a few days during a trip to Jerusalem when a young boy (see Lk 2:41-49). He carried on a public ministry (see Mt 4:17, 23; Lk 3:23); and was harried by unbelieving leaders and made to suffer and die during the time of Pontius Pilate, the Roman official in charge of Judea (see Mt 26:59-68, Mt 27:1-2, 11-50). He is fully human in all things, except sin (see Heb 4:15). Scripture says that Christ, *“though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but 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”* (Phil 2:6-8). **Belief in the true Incarnation of the Son of God is the distinctive sign of Christian faith.**

Why did the second person of the Trinity assume human nature? It was 1) to save all men and women from their sins and to reconcile them to God (see 1 Jn 4:10,14); 2) so that all men and women will know God’s love (see Jn 3:16); 3) to model holiness and the



Madonna and Child, by Bartolomé Murillo, 1617-1682

Christian life for all who would follow him (see Jn 15:12-20); and 4) to make it possible for all men and women to partake in his divine nature (see 2 Pt 1:4).

To save all men and women from their sins and to reconcile them to God

Our need to be healed, to be saved, to be raised from the death of sin and to be fully loved by our Creator — these vital needs God did not consider minor or insignificant. To God and to perhaps unknowing men and women, these miseries demanded action. They moved God the Son “to descend to human nature and visit it,” as St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote (see CCC 457). God himself came to reconcile us to him: *“in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself... For our sake he made him to be sin who knew*

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no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:19, 21). Jesus’ name, which means in Hebrew “God saves,” was given to him by angelic command to his Mother, Mary (see Lk 1:31) and to his foster-father, Joseph, to whom the angel proclaimed, “he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21). Jesus, as the God-man, can forgive sins and reconcile humanity to God. Jesus frees us all from the most dreadful bondage of all, slavery to sin (see Gal 5:1).

So that all men and women will know God’s love

Our first parents, through deliberate sin, endeavored to become God by defying his commands (see Gn 3:4-6), and humankind fell into the ongoing defiance of God, the slavery of sin. The Incarnation was the Father’s way of showing his continuing love for us: “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

To model holiness and the Christian life for all who would follow him

The Son of God, through the Incarnation, showed us how to become “like God” without sinning in the process. Upon coming into the world, the Son declared what was the only way to please God and to share his life and love and godliness: “For I have come down from Heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me” (Jn 6:38). At his Last Supper, on the night before he died, Jesus told his disciples: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me” (Jn 14:6). He told us, and showed us, how to make his coming among us as the God-man fruitful for ourselves: “take [your] cross and follow me” (Mt 10:38).

For us in our daily living, the significance of the Incarnation is that God invites us to “put on Christ” (Gal 3:27), to be “other Christs” doing good, combating evil, overcoming temptations, praying and living and witnessing to a God-centered life for our own salvation and for that of others with whom we daily come into contact. Like the incarnate Jesus, we are

to live the Incarnation in our own lives; and like him, love our neighbors as ourselves (see Mt 22:39). With Jesus, we must say: “Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God” (Heb 10:7).

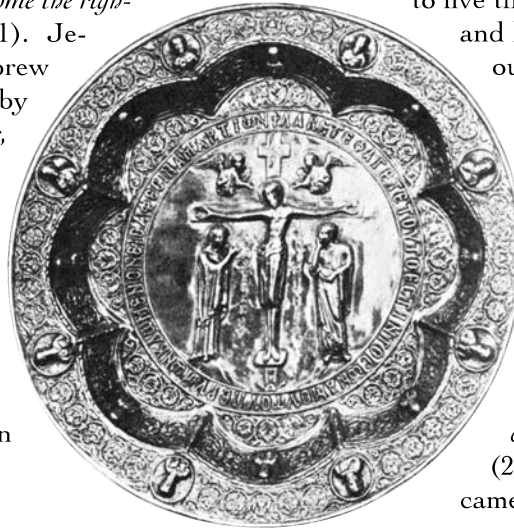
To make it possible for all men and women to partake in his divine nature

Finally, the most sublime gift of God made possible by the Incarnation: we may “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4). “[T]he Son of God became man so that we might become God,”¹ St. Athanasius astonishingly affirmed (CCC 460). St. Thomas Aquinas saw the Incarnation of the Son of God in a similar light: “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”² (CCC 460).

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the second person of the Blessed Trinity, became man through the Incarnation just for us: a stupendous, mind-boggling gift from a truly all-loving God who wants us to always know him and to call him “Father.” Yet even more than seeing Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God, as a gift from the Father is the fact that the Incarnation itself is the culmination, the climactic act, of the Creator God. In truth, the Incarnation is the crescendo of God’s whole creation. Creation, the underlying presence of God in the world, comes to its full fruition through the Incarnation of Jesus in our universe. It is literally the “Immanuel” (meaning “God with us”) that he intended from the beginning and which he ultimately fulfilled by giving us himself, as the prophet foretold: “The King of Israel, the Lord, is in our midst; you shall fear evil no more” (Zep 3:15).

Our access to God, our knowledge of God, our promised union with God, and our understanding of ourselves are all made manifest in the Incarnation. **The heart of the Catholic Faith is not an idea but a Person, who is true God and true man: Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Mary.**

(CCC 1, 422-423, 426, 430-433, 450, 456-463, 606-607)



Crucifixion depicted on silver paten, 11th century

¹ St. Athanasius, De inc., 54, 3 from J.P. Migne, ed., Patrologia Graeca 25, 192B (Paris, 1857-1866)

² St. Thomas Aquinas, Opusc. 57:1-4