

YEAR OF FAITH 2012-2013

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT | December 8-9, 2012

Jesus Christ. You have seen this Name used in many ways. Martyrs suffered great persecution and death for that Man; wars and conflicts have been fought over the meaning of His place in theology and culture; great works of art and architecture have found their inspiration in Him; Europe was first united then divided over its response to His message. Almost two-billion people worldwide are baptized into that Name. And, yet, somehow, people still call upon that Name in times of anger and frustration, using it as a curse upon others.

Who stands behind that Name? What has been His legacy in the course of human history?

As we approach the Christmas Season, where we will encounter those simple images of Jesus as an infant lying in the manger, we need to consider more deeply and profoundly the meaning of Jesus and who he was and is for us as Christians. The early church struggled to uncover a language that would most clearly express what the disciples encountered on that Third Day when they realized that Jesus was raised from the dead, changing not only the course of their lives but that of the entire human race as well.

Even if we do not understand what it means entirely, we profess the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed every Sunday as a clear statement of what we believe and specifically what we believe about Jesus as the Christ – the messiah, Son of God, who came to save us from our sins and lead us to life everlasting.

In our times it seems it is more the naysayer and cynic who gets the loudest word on the nature of Jesus where, more often than not, we are left to believe that some grand conspiracy was foisted upon the world, forcing our ancestors to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. While no academic historian would take this view, we are yet forced to respond to such claims as though they were credible.

To come to a full participation in our life as Catholic Christians we need to understand the truth and the history behind the truth of the dogmas we proclaim about Jesus Christ – True God and True Man.

Everywhere around us are the signs that we are gearing up for Christmas. Soon enough the manger scenes will be set up and we will be reminded of the coming of the infant Jesus into the world on that first Christmas night over two-thousand years ago. However, other than Christmas and Easter many of us do not pay all that much attention to Jesus as such. Our primary images of Jesus, then, are either as an infant in a manger or as triumphing over the death in the resurrection. Our churches are dominated by the image of Jesus crucified and in our Liturgy we proclaim the very Gospel of Jesus, yet seldom do we ever think of Jesus, alive, dynamic, walking through the marketplaces of Palestine, interacting with other human beings, living a life that on its surface looked like the life of every other person of his generation. Yet, we know as a matter of faith that Jesus is different from every other human being who has ever lived. We profess that in our creeds and celebrate it in the continuous cycle of the Liturgy. Yet pressed to answer the question as to how Jesus is unique within human history, most of us would stumble and come up short.

We know, of course, that Jesus stands at the very core of the Christian tradition and at the heart of our Catholic faith. Yet, many of us understand Jesus more through the lens of the modern novelist or on television specials and popular movies than we do through either history or the teaching of the church. In an age when we are prone to skepticism and conspiracy theories it makes sense that naysayers and cynics would find Jesus a prime target to attack. When we are uninformed as to the history and tradition of and about Jesus we become vulnerable to all sorts of strange ideas leading to a breakdown of our own personal faith and relationship with Jesus.

At the same time there are distinct differences in emphasis about Jesus among the various Christian sects. So the question as to how we understand Jesus as true God and true man must be carefully considered. It is not really enough to say that we are Christian, for though indeed we are, we are also uniquely Catholic. Therein lay an important point of emphasis one that we often overlook. Hence we must consider the uniqueness of Jesus as well as to clearly articulate the church's long standing dogmatic definition about Jesus.

No serious historian today doubts that Jesus is an actual historical figure who lived in Palestine two-thousand years ago. There are too many references to Jesus and his disciples in the contemporaneous historical record to conclude otherwise. This matter, despite the resurgence among skeptics, was settled over a century ago, when serious scholarship regarding the nature of Jesus was very much in vogue. In today's Gospel the evangelist Saint Luke provides us with a specific historical context with which to understand the Gospel. Himself a convert to the nascent Christian faith, Luke presents us with a clear and researched document that helps to define the nature of the person of Jesus, his ministry and teaching, and offers the framework for further theological reflection.

Similarly, the historical reliability of the Gospels was once also very much a matter of debate. While they are not biographies of Jesus – especially in terms of what one expects of a modern biography – they do provide keen insights into the person, mission and nature of Jesus. While some people find the Gospels to be confusing, and will often point to the apparent discrepancies that appear within them, they are undeniably mid to late first century documents bearing evidence of eye witness accounts and a clear understanding of the historical situations of the period they are about and not the one in which they were written. Most if not all of the Gospels were written after the Romans destroyed the city of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., a fact that certainly influenced the authors thinking. The fact of the apparent discrepancies is a testimony to their truthfulness. The early Christian church was quite comfortable with some confusion as to details about specific events in the life of Jesus because they understood both human nature and, more importantly, because they knew that it was Jesus' death and resurrection that was the very heart of the message. The rest was just details.

Although Jesus was conceived by his virgin mother, our Mother Mary, through the power of the Holy Spirit – his life was otherwise ordinary. We don't often think of Jesus the infant or Jesus the toddler, but like all of us, Jesus had to learn the ordinary things and undergo the normal human experiences. We see this expressed very clearly in the Gospels as the townspeople of Nazareth, the village of Jesus' youth, scoff at him because they know him. They "know" his origins, his family and his background.

This places an important element into our understanding of Jesus. He is fully a human person, with all of the thoughts, feelings, emotions and desires of our humanity. The Second Vatican Council Document *Gaudium et Spes* (22), states it all so succinctly: "He Who is 'the image of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15) is Himself the perfect man. To the sons of Adam He restores the divine likeness which had been disfigured from the first sin onward. Since human nature as He assumed it was not annulled, by that very fact it has been raised up to a divine dignity in our respect too. For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin."

Tempted, challenged and confronted, Jesus is without sin. He stands before us and before God as what perfect humanity would be, could be and will be in the Kingdom of God.

It does not however, end there. Jesus is not merely some sort of superman, a messiah among messiahs, a great thinker or teacher like others upon whom philosophical ideas or religious principles are based. Jesus is the incarnation of the Divine Logos, the very Word of God – he is fully human, yes, but he is also God made man.

The Second Person of the Blessed Trinity – the very same and One God of the universe, who is the source of creation – is present in the man from Galilee. Jesus has a fully human nature, but he also has a fully divine nature. The church clarified the dogmas about Jesus over the first six centuries of our history. Because of the distinct uniqueness of Jesus, and the need to safeguard the integrity of the faith, a fine line of language had to be developed in order to provide categories to understand and proclaim Jesus to a world dominated by polytheistic cultic rituals. The Church Fathers needed to insure that Jesus was not regarded as merely another son of Zeus, Jupiter, Odin or any of the other idols of the cultures encountered by the missionaries of the church. At the same time it was necessary to defend the integrity and individuality of Jesus' humanity and divinity, both of which were under attack at different times from various heresies. Indeed as we recite the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed we are acknowledging the uniqueness of Jesus – "I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man."

Jesus is God, fully and completely from eternity.

While Jesus – the Word of God – was made incarnate, became a human person, as we celebrate at Christmas – there is never a time when the Son of God does not exist. The Trinity is eternal, hence Jesus is eternal. And, although is called Jesus "Son" this does not mean generational difference as it does for us. Instead we profess that through the power of the Holy Spirit Mary conceived Jesus and that he was became human. Jesus possesses a fully human mind, a human soul, a human will. Jesus also possesses the mind of God, the incarnation of the Divine Logos and the divine will. Jesus humanity is in continual dialogue with his divine nature. Jesus the man gradually comes to know his divinity as it is revealed to

him. Saint Luke (2:52) says of the twelve year old Jesus: “And Jesus advanced [in] wisdom and age and favor before God and man.”

Through the great mystery of the Incarnation that we will celebrate in just two weeks from now, The Word of God became a human person to elevate our humanity and to show us how to live that humanity to its fullest. At the same time, the Incarnation also is the expression of the deep love that God has for us in that he took on our human condition, became one of us, making the encounter with the divine all the more possible.

To understand Jesus as True God and True Man is not simply a statement of dogmatic truth, it is to enter more deeply into the mystery of our humanity and to encounter the very face and presence of God. Jesus transformed our humanity by becoming human. As we conform ourselves more and more to Christ through as faithful disciples, we are challenged to carry that transformation to the ends of the earth.

The Year of Faith provides us with a great opportunity to come to understand more completely what we profess with our lives. It is essential to the New Evangelization that we have a clear and accurate understanding of who Jesus is. In order for us to effectively proclaim our Catholic Christian faith we must know Jesus. All of our belief as Catholics hinges on our understanding of Jesus. Virtually all of the confusion in our church over these past fifty years has at its origin an incomplete or inaccurate definition of Jesus. The church, the Sacraments, religious life, the social and personal morality, and at the highpoint our Liturgy, depends on our understanding the singular and particular nature of Jesus as True God and True Man. For our part then, it is imperative that we rediscover the greatest mystery of our faith – the Incarnation.