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# **Christ: Lord and Savior**

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**T**here is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

The Catholic Church confesses that Jesus Christ, the man born 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem, is himself the eternal Son of God and the only Savior of mankind. Our belief depends not on natural human investigation but on God’s own words and promises, *the faith once delivered to the saints* (Jude 1:3). The words above, taken from the New Testament, express the solemn praise bursting forth in the hearts of all who have come into contact with the living Christ and been freed from sin and death. Christians cry out: “Jesus is Lord! King of Kings! Lord of Lords! The Son of the living God!” What do we mean by these titles and praises? How can a man, born in time, be the eternal Son of God? In this booklet we will consider who Christ is, how the Church knows him, and why we speak of him as we do.

This booklet is divided into three parts. Taken together, these serve as an introduction to the Catholic Church’s faith concerning Jesus Christ.

I. WHO IS JESUS CHRIST?

II. HOW DO WE KNOW ABOUT CHRIST?

III. HOW DO WE MEET CHRIST?

## **PART I. WHO IS JESUS CHRIST?**

From the Bible we know that Jesus' mother was the virgin Mary and that his foster father was Joseph the carpenter (Mt 1:18–20, 13:55; Lk 1:26–35, 3:23). Jesus too was a carpenter (Mk 6:3). James, Joseph, Simon and Jude were close relatives, perhaps cousins (Mt 13:55).<sup>1</sup> Jesus, a speaker of Aramaic, could read the Old Testament in its original Hebrew (Lk 4:18).

The public ministry of Jesus began after his baptism by his cousin John the Baptist (Lk 3:21–23, 36). Jesus taught in synagogues and in the streets; he debated with scribes and other experts in the Jewish Law (that is, the religion and words of the Old Testament). He gathered disciples, worked miracles, expelled demons, healed the sick, and announced the coming of the reign of God. Jesus associated with sinners, something which brought sharp disapproval from the scribes and Pharisees.

The Gospels suggest that the public ministry of Jesus lasted three years. Since *Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age* (Lk 3:23), Christians estimate that he was crucified around age thirty-three. Hated by the scribes and Pharisees for his popularity, for exposing their hypocrisy, and for claiming to be the Son of God, Jesus was put to death when his enemies convinced the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, that Jesus was a threat to the Roman Empire.

After three days in the tomb, Jesus rose from the dead and appeared first to Mary Magdalene and then to his apostles and disciples (cf. Mt 28:1–10, Mk 16:9–18, Jn 20:1–30, 1 Cor 15:5–8). After forty days spent teaching them (Acts 1:3), He ascended to heaven (cf. Mt 28:16–20, Mk 16:19, Lk 24:51, Acts 1:9–11).

## **Heresies and the Development of Doctrine**

The facts about Jesus' life would be of little interest were he not the Christ, the Savior of the world, God Himself appearing in human flesh.

The key assertion we Catholics make about Christ is that he is “truly God and truly man.” He is not a mixture of divinity and humanity, or “somewhat divine” and “somewhat human.” Rather, the one and only Son and Word of God, who is truly and completely God from all eternity, has become one of us—true man, born of the Virgin Mary. Christ is complete and perfect in his divinity as the Eternal Son of the Father, and he is complete and perfect in his humanity, in the manhood he took to himself for our sake. The divinity and humanity of Christ are so knit together that they are inseparable; they are perfectly united, and this union of divinity and manhood is the cause of our salvation.

There are basically two ways to go wrong in speaking about who Christ is: one can deny his full divinity or one can deny his full humanity. The easiest way to grasp what the Church believes is to trace the history of the heresies that have confronted her over the centuries. By wrestling with questions and controversies, the Church has steadily clarified her teaching and has developed very accurate and careful ways of speaking

about the mystery of the incarnation—that is, about how Jesus is truly God and truly man.

Heresies—deviations from the truth of the Catholic faith—arise not only out of malice or mischief. Often enough, heresies begin with innocent mistakes and well-intentioned but misguided judgments. In testing or pursuing an idea that, at first, may seem entirely faithful and reasonable, one can inadvertently wander off the path of sound faith. Typically, heresies emerge when believers emphasize just one aspect of a teaching to the detriment of the whole truth. Making an innocent mistake is not heresy in the strict or formal sense—strictly speaking, heresy only occurs when a Christian stubbornly clings to an error, despite the Church’s correction and teaching to the contrary.

In Christology—the area of doctrine concerning Christ—heresies and various inadequate ideas have given the Church reason to articulate what she believes about Jesus Christ more specifically and clearly.

The main questions about the human and divine natures of Christ emerged in the first 500 years of Christian history. Debate was most heated for the two centuries between roughly A.D. 275 and A.D. 475. In this period, a series of Ecumenical (“Universal”) Councils were held by the Popes and bishops to resolve controversies and defend the Church’s faith against error.

Among early heresies, we can recognize a whole family of mistakes that deny Christ’s true humanity.

Perhaps the simplest form in this family was the heresy called

**docetism**—named from the Greek verb “dokeo,” meaning “to seem.” The docetists were of the opinion that Christ only *seemed* to have a body, only *seemed* to suffer, and only *seemed* to die. In reality, the docetists said, Jesus was only an apparition or an illusion, and not a physical being. Docetism was motivated by a desire to affirm the divinity of Christ—the docetists were, in effect, afraid that by admitting to Christ’s real body and real suffering they would be left unable to maintain that he is divine. The Church certainly needed to maintain faith in Christ’s divinity, but she recognized that it would be a great mistake to argue this point by denying his humanity! This early crisis led the Church to see that she had to affirm *both* the divinity and humanity of Christ at the same time.

Closely related to docetism was the more complicated (and influential) heresy called **gnosticism**. (Gnosticism gets its name from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning *knowledge*.) Gnostics did not all agree with each other, but on the whole they did agree that the saving work of Christ was mainly a work of enlightenment—that is, of imparting secret knowledge (*gnosis*). This secret enlightenment, it was supposed, would purify and lift the mind up to a divine life. The body, however, was to be despised and abandoned. Now while God does enlighten us with a knowledge of himself, the gnostic movement effectively denied the importance of Christ’s (and our own) physical humanity. The suffering and death of Christ, certainly, had no useful place in the gnostic scheme. Moreover, gnosticism tended to reinterpret the sacraments as “merely symbolic actions” (instead of really effective ones), to reduce the Church to “the enlightened” (i.e., the gnostic cliques), setting up in place of bishops a curious elite judged superior for their possession of secret knowledge. Naturally, the Church had little patience with gnosticism—Christ had come, after all, not for an elite

group of “insiders” but for all. Moreover, he did not want his followers to keep his teachings secret, but to preach them to the ends of the earth. Finally, it was important for the Church to hold fast to the fact that we are saved through incorporation into Christ—a change that involves the conversion and transformation of one’s whole life and character. Salvation is not only about knowledge.

A third heresy in this family, non-Christian in origin, was **Manichaeism**, named for its founder Mani. The Manichaeans imagined there were two gods, one good and the other evil. The evil god, they thought, was responsible for the creation of matter and for the “imprisonment” of souls within bodies. Thus the Manichaeans, amidst many other mistakes, dismissed the suggestion that God (the good god) could save us by sending Christ in the flesh to suffer and die. Since they considered matter and bodies evil, they had little interest in doctrines about Christ’s real humanity, his death, or his resurrection. While Christians appreciated that the soul and spiritual things are more important than material concerns, they saw that the Manichaean solution was sacrificing the whole truth in overemphasizing just one aspect.

None of these heresies proved as dangerous or divisive for the Church as did **Arianism**, the heresy authored by a priest named Arius (A.D. 250–336). The teachings of Arius were rather sophisticated. He claimed that Christ was “divine,” but not quite so divine as God the Father. The Son, he taught, was a creature who was neither eternal nor the “true God.” (The point which Arius exaggerated here is that Christ has his origin in God the Father.) Besides denying Christ’s true and full divinity, Arius also claimed that Christ had no human soul; he argued instead that Christ’s human body, though real, was ani-

mated by a semi-divine spirit and that Christ lacked a human mind and will. Arius' guiding principle, however, was that only the Father was really God (since only the Father is not "from" anyone else).

In response to the Arian crisis, a meeting of bishops from throughout the Church was held in Nicea (modern northwest Turkey) in A.D. 325. This first Ecumenical Council affirmed that Christ is truly and perfectly divine, even though he is "from the Father"—indeed, *precisely because* he is "from the Father." The bishops at Nicea composed a creed, a precisely articulated expression of the Church's faith, which is the basis of the creed all Catholics still sing or recite when celebrating the Holy Eucharist. The Nicene Creed confesses belief in God the Almighty Father and "in our one Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, the only-begotten born of the Father, that is, of the substance of the Father, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, born, not made...." Here we can see the clear affirmation of the Son's equality with the Father—the Son is not a lesser God or a creature. Jesus, the Son, is "of the same substance of the Father." Jesus, the Son, is "God from God, light from light, true God from true God." The Son is not less than the Father and was not created in time. The Son was "begotten, not made"—that is, he originates from the Father, but is not a creature (separate from the Father's substance).

After the Council of Nicea rejected Arianism, a bishop named Apollinaris (A.D. 310-390) erred in the opposite direction by denying Christ's true and perfect humanity. Although Apollinaris thought Christ must have had an "animal soul" to enliven his body, he held that for the incarnation to take place the eternal Son of God must have taken the place of the human soul of Jesus. **Apollinarianism** was rejected as heretical by the

second Ecumenical Council, namely the First Council of Constantinople, in A.D. 381. In opposing Apollinaris, the Church insisted that the Son of God really had become a true man—Christ was not just God *using* a body.

An exceptionally important fifth century heresy was eventually called **Nestorianism**, acquiring its name from Nestorius, Patriarch (Bishop) of Constantinople, who was its most famous proponent. Nestorius wanted to affirm that Christ is both God and man, but found himself confused by questions about the unity of these two natures.

Trouble began when Nestorius rejected the title *Theotokos* (God-Bearer or Mother of God), which Christians traditionally ascribe to the Virgin Mary. Nestorius would admit that Christ is God, and that Mary is Christ’s mother, but he found himself uneasy with the title *Theotokos*. Nestorius resisted because he thought that calling Mary “Mother of God” suggested that the Son of God did not exist before being born of Mary, or that somehow the Son’s existence as eternal God depended on her.

As an alternative, Nestorius proposed the title *Christotokos*, “Mother of Christ,” stressing that Mary only became the Son’s mother in time—that is, when the Son became man. Unfortunately, the Nestorian approach treats “Christ” and “God the Son” as two different persons (one born of Mary, the other not). Since Christ is truly God, it is impossible to say that Mary gave birth to Christ without giving birth to God. To avoid Nestorius’ confusion, we need only recall that Christ is eternally God, the Son of the Father, while he became Mary’s son only in time. Since Christ remains forever true God and true man, Mary is rightly called “Theotokos”—for she bore the one, permanent person, God the Son, who became man in her womb.

Nestorianism was condemned at the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (in modern Turkey) in A.D. 431. This was the third ecumenical council in the Church's history.

Close on the heels of Nestorius came another opinion, commonly called **monophysitism** and associated with the abbot Eutyches. Eutyches refused to speak of "two natures" in Christ, though at the same time he seems to have wanted to affirm that Christ was true God and true man. Condemned along with Eutyches were a number of bishops who held to a doctrinal formula composed many years earlier by St. Cyril of Alexandria. Tarred as "monophysites" (not a name they accepted!), these bishops and theologians argued that in the Incarnation two natures, human and divine, were combined and united in such a way that they could no longer be spoken of as two. Thus they spoke of "one nature after the Incarnation" (*mia physis*, in Greek)—the unique nature of the Incarnate Word—and refused the creed adopted by the larger Church.

The view of Eutyches and the "monophysites" was rejected at the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451.<sup>2</sup> At this Council, this Church articulated her most ample confession of faith concerning the reality of the Incarnation.

Following the holy Fathers, we unanimously teach and confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, composed of rational soul and body; consubstantial with the Father as to his divinity and consubstantial with us as to his humanity; "like us in all things but sin." He was begotten from the Father before all ages as to his divinity and in these last

days, for us and for our salvation, was born as to his humanity of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God.

We confess that one and the same Christ, Lord, and only-begotten Son, is to be acknowledged in two natures without confusion, change, division, or separation. The distinction between the natures was never abolished by their union, but rather the character proper to each of the two natures was preserved as they came together in one person (*prosopon*) and one hypostasis.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, after the Council of Chalcedon, the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople met in A.D. 553 and (among other projects) tried to extend the olive branch to the “monophysite” Churches. To emphasize the reality of the union of divinity and humanity in Christ, Constantinople II expressly confirmed that Jesus Christ *is* the Second Person of the Holy Trinity—he is not merely the “embodiment” of the Eternal Son. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, this means that “everything in Christ’s human nature is to be attributed to his divine person as its proper subject, not only his miracles but also his sufferings and even his death: ‘He who was crucified in the flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ, is true God, Lord of glory, and *one of the Holy Trinity*’” (*Catechism* n. 468).

The twists and turns of this early history are not easy to follow, especially since modern readers may not see the importance of all the fine points which the Ecumenical Councils needed to make. We can summarize the importance of this history by stressing that:

**1. Jesus is a real, physical man:** not an angel or a person

who only *appeared* to be born, to suffer, die, and rise from the dead. (*No Docetism!*)

**2. Jesus saves us, body and soul:** physical reality, his and ours, is inseparable from “spiritual” salvation. Thus the Church, sacraments, bodily resurrection, and all of earthly life are intimately part of Christ’s saving work. (*No gnosticism, no Manichaeism!*)

**3. The Son of God is truly God,** equal to the Father in divinity. (*No Arianism!*)

**4. Jesus has a human soul**—he is not just God using a body. (*No Apollinarianism!*)

**5. Christ our God is one individual,** truly God and truly man—there is no person “Jesus” except the Second Person of the Holy Trinity; in the Incarnation humanity and divinity are truly united, yet neither nature is compromised. (*No Nestorianism or monophysitism!*)

## **Jesus reveals the Father and the Holy Spirit**

Without the coming of Jesus Christ, we would not know about the Holy Trinity.

Of all Christian teachings, the doctrine of the Trinity is the most mysterious and the hardest to understand. As Saint Augustine said, while there is no subject more dangerous or difficult, there is also no subject where finding the truth is more precious.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus reveals that God is not solitary. On the contrary, the divine life is a life of three eternal divine persons who live in a perfect communion of love, knowledge, and glory. These three persons are God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Jesus identifies himself as the eternal Son of God, and explains that he comes from the Father (Jn 16:28). He says also that the Father and the Son will send the Holy Spirit (Jn 15:26).

One of the more revealing titles given to Christ in Holy Scripture is the name “Word:” *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father* (Jn 1:1, 14). (See also Rv 19:13.)

Why is the Son of God called *the Word*? A word, of course, is an expression of something in the mind of the person speaking. When we human beings speak, we reveal our minds. It is extremely satisfying when we can express ourselves completely and forcefully, especially when we are uttering a deep conviction or are putting into words a strong feeling of love, anger, or sorrow. By contrast, if we cannot make ourselves understood, it can be bitterly frustrating.

Upon reflection, we can appreciate that when God the Father speaks eternally from his own depths, his “Word” is perfect, complete, and utterly expressive of himself. This is why the name “Word” is applied to the Second Person of the Trinity, that is, to God the Son. The Son, who became man, our Lord Jesus Christ, *is* the perfect image and manifestation of the Father. Christ, the Eternal Son, is *the image of the invisible God*

(Col 1:15, cf. 2 Cor 4:4), who *reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature* (Heb 1:3). This is why, when the apostle St. Philip asked Jesus to reveal God the Father, Christ replied, *Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?* (Jn 14:9).

Besides revealing the Father to us (that is, by revealing that the God of Israel *is* a Father, and not just a solitary person), Jesus also made known to us the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, namely the Holy Spirit.

This name, “Holy Spirit,” itself is not especially revealing, since both the Father and the Son are certainly holy and spiritual. Nevertheless, it is fitting that this Person’s name be, so to speak, inconspicuous—for the Third Person of the Trinity does not draw attention to himself; rather he is the gift given to make God’s Word known. As the *Catechism* puts it,

Now God’s Spirit, who reveals God, makes known to us Christ, his Word, his living Utterance, but the Spirit does not speak of himself. The Spirit who “has spoken through the prophets” makes us hear the Father’s Word, but we do not hear the Spirit himself. We know him only in the movement by which he reveals the Word to us and disposes us to welcome him in faith. The Spirit of truth who “unveils” Christ to us “will not speak on his own” {Jn 16:13}. Such properly divine self-effacement explains why “the world cannot receive [him], because it neither sees him nor knows him,” while those who believe in Christ know the Spirit because he dwells with them {Jn 14:17}.<sup>5</sup>

In Scripture, we learn that it is the Holy Spirit who brought about the conception of Jesus in the womb of the Virgin Mary (cf. Mt 1:20, Lk 1:35). So too, it is the Spirit who is sent to make Christ present to us and to incorporate us into Christ's living body, the Church. Only by the active power of the Holy Spirit can we believe, pray, and enter into the communion of the Trinity. As St. Basil the Great said,

Through the Holy Spirit we are restored to paradise, led back to the Kingdom of heaven, and adopted as children, given confidence to call God "Father" and to share in Christ's grace, called children of light and given a share in eternal glory.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus Christ did not completely reveal the Holy Spirit to us until the day of Pentecost, when—after his death and resurrection—he bestowed the Spirit on the apostles gathered in prayer with the Virgin Mary (see Acts 1:14–2:4). According to Christ's promise, it is the Holy Spirit, sent to us by the Father because of Christ, who confirms the Church in her knowledge of the truth (cf. Jn 14:16–17, 25–26) and who enriches us with every spiritual gift (cf. Gal 5:22–23, Is 11:1–2).

"God is love" and love is his first gift, containing all others. "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."<sup>7</sup>

Because this divine love is a gift, and not something we can acquire on our own, we confess our need to receive it from Almighty God. Indeed, the good news of the Gospel is that God himself wants to bestow the Spirit on us, and to bring us into the everlasting communion of his own divine life. All that the Eternal Son enjoys by nature—the perfection of life and

love in communion with the Father—we are called to enjoy by grace. It is for this that Christ came, died, rose, and bestowed the Spirit.

One can hardly overemphasize the fact that Christianity alone, of all major religions and philosophies, claims that God became man so that man might share in the life of God. Because of Christ, Christianity promises permanent, personal, “face to face” communion with the Triune God. Even the great monotheistic faiths of Judaism and Islam do not promise such full personal communion with God—and much less the Eastern religions of Buddhism and Hinduism. Thus while Christians acknowledge that the saving power of God may extend to those who are ignorant of Christ, we must affirm that it is through Christ alone that the gift of salvation is won and bestowed. There is, as Scripture says, *no other name by which we are to be saved* (cf. Acts 4:12); and as no other religion claims to offer such a salvation, it should not be surprising that Christians recognize Jesus as the only savior.

There is only one salvific economy of the One and Triune God, realized in the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, actualized with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, and extended in its salvific value to all humanity and to the entire universe: “No one, therefore, can enter into communion with God except through Christ, by the working of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>8</sup>

While there may be many religious teachers in the world, and many ideas about the purpose of religion, those who believe that man is made for eternal, personal communion with God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) confess that only God himself

can give us this gift. To say this is not to prejudice those who have not received the Gospel, or to deny that the power of Christ is at work throughout the whole family of man, and indeed the whole cosmos. Our burning concern, rather, is to confess that Jesus is indeed the only Lord and Savior. He is not “one more” religious leader among many, nor is the Catholic faith “one more” religion. To admit Christ at all is to admit him on his own terms, as uniquely *the way, the truth and the life* (Jn 14:6).

## **PART II: HOW DO WE KNOW ABOUT CHRIST?**

### **Problem vs. Mystery**

In thinking about Jesus Christ, it is critical that we appreciate the difference between a *mystery* and a *problem*. *Problems* are difficulties to be solved; *mysteries* are truths to be embraced in loving contemplation.

A *problem* describes an unresolved situation which can be resolved by further investigation. *Problems* remain unsolved because of their complexity, not because they are intrinsically unsolvable. They could be solved if we had the time, intelligence and sufficient information. For instance, if your car or computer does not start or function properly, this is a *problem* to be solved—not a *mystery* to be contemplated! Even if the best technicians cannot offer a satisfactory remedy, what we face is an unsolved *problem*.

*Mysteries*, on the other hand, cannot be—and are not waiting to be—solved.<sup>9</sup> They exceed human powers of discovery and description, and are not subject to experimentation or to man’s

empirical scrutiny. Because the coming of the Son of God as man is a *mystery*, the Church is not waiting for a brilliant theologian to come along and *explain* it. This mystery, like the mystery of the Holy Trinity, is something we can contemplate and appreciate, but it is not a matter that we can account for in terms of all its causes and effects. Unlike internal combustion engines and various physical phenomena, *mysteries* do not yield to disassembly, demonstration, or mathematical description.

The reason mysteries defy rational comprehension is not that they are illogical or self-contradictory. Rather, mysteries are obscure to us because our minds are limited by nature (and by the darkness and confusion introduced by sin). In itself a mystery of faith is simply too vast and too bright to be taken in by our limited mental vision. As St. Thomas Aquinas put it, when we look at God's mysteries we are like night-owls seeing the sun—our sight fails not because of darkness, but because the light is more than we can take in.

That Christian teachings about Christ are *mysterious* in this sense should come as no surprise. Indeed, it would be rather suspicious if one claimed to have demonstrations and positive proofs for the inner life and plans of Almighty God. To know that God exists is, for human reason, possible to discover; but to know God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or that Jesus Christ is the Eternal Son and our Savior, is something we can only learn from God himself.

### **Witnesses to Christ: Scripture, Tradition and the Church**

Our knowledge about Christ comes neither from experiments

nor from projects in historical biography. Instead, we know about Christ from witnesses. After the Holy Spirit himself, the primary witness to Christ is his bride, the Catholic Church.

Our skeptical culture is very uncomfortable relying on the testimony of witnesses—at least, when we realize that we are doing so. Too often this skepticism leads to a deeply irrational demand for proof. Underlying this demand is a hidden assumption that what cannot be proven must not be true. But this assumption itself is false.

We regularly and readily believe doctors, scientists, news reporters, and experts of all kinds. Indeed, were we to suspend our trust completely, we would be paralyzed. Can we trust our own eyes? Can we trust that our breakfast has not been poisoned? Can we trust that we are not asleep and dreaming all the time? One can enter into an endless game of doubting—but this fruitless game does not give the doubter any advantage in finding the truth or learning wisdom.

The necessity of trust is most clear when we consider the possibility of a revelation coming from Almighty God. When God reveals himself, we ought to expect this revelation to exceed our capacity for proof and demonstration. Thus our natural position, relative to God, calls for some measure of trust—if he reveals, we must be willing to believe him.

The visible witness attesting to the truth about Jesus Christ is his Church. It is the Church that proclaims Christ in the world, the Church that is the custodian and interpreter of the Scriptures, the Church that hands on teaching and authority from Christ's Apostles, the Church that is guided in truth and animated by the Holy Spirit, the Church that dwells in constant

union with the risen Christ through grace and the Sacraments.

## **The Church Christ Founded**

It is simply impossible to talk about Jesus and his revelation to us without discussing the Church he founded and the apostles he commissioned. What we know about Jesus, the way we pray and celebrate his Eucharist, indeed all the truths of the Christian religion, come to us through Scripture and Tradition, safeguarded by the bishops of the church, who are the successors of the twelve apostles Jesus himself chose to herald and defend the true faith.

Jesus makes it clear in the Bible that he called twelve apostles and commissioned them to act in his name (cf. Mt 10:2, Mk 6:7, Lk 9:1, Acts 5:12, etc.). They were to baptize, heal, forgive sins and cast out demons. Jesus has mysteriously given mere men a share in his own ministry, even as God gave Adam and Eve a share in His own creative power to bring forth new life.

The teachings of Christ are preserved in Scripture and Tradition, and faithfully passed on through the Church's preaching. "Scripture"—a word which simply means "writings"—is the Bible: the Old and New Testaments. The Church reveres the Bible because it is inspired by the Holy Spirit. In other words, God is the primary author of Scripture.<sup>10</sup>

"Tradition" refers to the living practice of the faith, and in a sense includes the venerated Scriptures, especially in their liturgical context (i.e., the Bible as it is read and proclaimed in divine worship). Tradition is embodied in the prayers and creeds of the Church, in the teachings of the Pope and bishops

(especially in local and ecumenical councils, but also in ordinary preaching and teaching), in the wisdom of the saints, and—in varying degrees—in the customs and observances that make up Catholic life. Sometimes we must distinguish between simple tradition and “Sacred Tradition” (that is, the heritage of truth passed down from generation to generation), but in general it suffices to recognize that God has chosen to communicate the truths of revelation to us through the community of faith, the Church, as she teaches and lives through the centuries.

To speak of Tradition makes some non-Catholic Christians uneasy, since accepting tradition means trusting God to work through his Church—and through teachers who are not all saints. Nevertheless, it is unreasonable and unrealistic to suppose that Christian revelation is handed on by the Bible alone (cf. Jn 21:25). After all, the Bible itself was not compiled except by the Church, and the New Testament was not written until the Church was already alive and teaching.

After Christ ascended into heaven, it was about twenty years before St. Paul’s first letter was written, and at least thirty years before the first Gospel was completed. It took some seventy years before all of the books of the New Testament were composed. In the first century, the Mass was celebrated, Jesus was worshiped, the sick were healed and demons were cast out—the Acts of the Apostles records this early life of the Church. Still, it was another two hundred years before all the books of the Bible were gathered into one definitive form. And it was the Catholic Church, her Pope and bishops, who guided by the Holy Spirit, judged which writings were inspired by God and which were not.

The New Testament itself attests to the importance of Sacred Tradition—St. Paul, clearly, does not imagine that all Christian doctrine is written out in the Bible. Thus he says, *I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you* (1 Cor 11:2), and again, *brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter* (2 Thes 2:15).

### **PART III: HOW DO WE MEET CHRIST?**

The Christian life is not simply one of learning *about* Christ or Church doctrine. Rather, our purpose is eternal life: *And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent* (Jn 17:3). This personal knowing of Christ, and of God the Father in him, is not a goal that lies off in the distant future. Rather, while it is true that we will only see God face to face in heaven, Christ has come precisely so that we might be made the friends of God here and now. Eternal life begins here on earth.

To appreciate the gift of eternal life, we must recognize that there are two major gaps to be bridged before we can come to God.

First, there is the chasm caused by sin—our personal offenses (actual sin) and the general state of original sin brought about by the sin of our first human parents, Adam and Eve.

Second, there is the chasm that naturally lies between the Creator and all creatures. The only “natural” sharers in the

divine life are the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—that is, only the Persons of the Holy Trinity are each other’s natural intimates. However, the divine persons have desired to share their life with created persons, with beings naturally utterly inferior to themselves. If we (and the angels) are to share in the divine life, it will only be because God has some practical means of accommodating himself to our nature and of elevating us to a *supernatural* condition.

In Jesus Christ, and in him alone, God overcomes both obstacles to our sharing in the divine life.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:3–4).

The obstacle of sin is overcome by the sacrificial death of Christ. First, all sin (original and personal) is washed away through baptism: *We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life* (Rom 6:4; cf. 2 Cor 5:17, Gal 6:15, Col 2:12). Second, sins committed after baptism are forgiven through the power Christ gave his apostles after the resurrection when he said, *Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained* (Jn 20:22–23; cf. Mt 16:19).

Now while the mercy of God is, we might say, the beginning of

our salvation in Christ, we must remember that entering into the divine life involves more than being set free from sin. Again, since intimacy and friendship with God is something “natural” only for the persons of the Trinity, man must receive elevating and transforming gifts from God in order to join in that heavenly communion. And just as Christ our savior became man and was born of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, so too do we rely on the active power of the Spirit for our new life (cf. Jn 3:3–5).

“No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” [1 Cor 12:3]. “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba!, Father!’” [Gal 4:6]. This knowledge of faith is possible only in the Holy Spirit: to be in touch with Christ, we must first have been touched by the Holy Spirit. He comes to meet us and kindles faith in us. By virtue of our Baptism, the first sacrament of the faith, the Holy Spirit in the Church communicates to us, intimately and personally, the life that originates in the Father and is offered to us in the Son.<sup>11</sup>

“To be in touch with Christ, we must first have been touched by the Holy Spirit.” For some, being touched by the Holy Spirit is a dramatic moment causing a complete change in lifestyle. This is especially the case when a person has been living in serious sin. For others, being touched by the Holy Spirit is manifested more silently in a person’s life, confirming him in doing good and giving him the courage to confess his sins and repent of them. Whenever the sinner stops willing evil and begins to will good, it is a sign of grace. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is at work hour by hour, drawing and inviting even those who despise God to turn back to him and be saved.

The response required of us is fidelity—that is, the willing acceptance of God’s gifts of light or knowledge, and of the Spirit’s impulses to goodness, love, and holiness of life.

## **The Way of Transformation in Christ**

Coming to know Jesus Christ means being transformed in him by the power of the Holy Spirit and made holy. This work is, necessarily, a work of God—it is not in our human power to bring it about. However, God’s grace is such that it perfects and elevates us, so that our human works are taken up into the designs and accomplishments of God. He works through and in us. Thus God enables us to do what is beyond our natural power: to know and love him in a way that is truly suitable to our nature as men and to his nature as God.

This coming to know and love God in Christ does not depend on seeing Jesus physically. Indeed, many people who saw Christ during his earthly life failed to recognize him (cf. Lk 23:39–43, Jn 18:28–19:22, 1 Cor 2:8). As we have already said, our knowledge depends on the invisible working of the Spirit. Nevertheless, in his wisdom God has chosen to employ many visible, material means for the purpose of teaching us and communicating to us the life of grace. Our fidelity to the Lord entails a faithfulness to these practical means established for our salvation.

Of these practical means, we should mention the visible Church, the liturgy and sacraments, the Scriptures, charity (especially love for the poor and the suffering), and asceticism.

## **The Visible Church**

Almighty God, desiring to bring each of us into communion with himself and with one another in him, was not willing to leave us to ourselves in this life. Instead, the Lord has adopted a visible group of people—first Israel, then the Church—as a sign and instrument of his own life. As the Second Vatican Council put it:

At all times and in every race, anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him. He has, however, willed to make men holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness. He therefore chose the Israelite race to be his own people and established a covenant with it. He gradually instructed his people.... All these things, however, happened as a preparation and figure of that new and perfect covenant which was to be ratified in Christ...the New Covenant in his blood; he called together a race made up of Jews and Gentiles, which would be one, not according to the flesh, but in the Spirit.<sup>12</sup>

This new people is united into a body that has Christ himself as its head (cf. Col 1:18). This body, the Church, is also called Christ's bride because of the love he has for her and because it is Christ who makes the Church fruitful with new life (cf. Mt 22:1–14, 25:1–13; Mk 2:19; 1 Cor 6:15–17; 2 Cor 11:2, Eph 1:4, 5:25–32; Rv 22:17). Finally, Christ's body and bride, the Church, is also the temple or dwelling place of the Holy Spirit: "To this Spirit of Christ, as an invisible principle, is to be ascribed the fact that all the parts of the body are joined one with the other

and with their exalted head; for the whole Spirit of Christ is in the head, the whole Spirit is in the body, and the whole Spirit is in each of the members.”<sup>13</sup>

By God’s gift and design, the Church has the mission of preaching the Gospel of Christ to the whole world. The work of teaching, of sanctifying, and of governing the People of God was entrusted by Christ to the Apostles and to their successors, so that throughout the ages Christians may receive the Gospel and graces of Christ just as God has seen fit to deliver them.

## **The Liturgy and Sacraments**

At the center of the Church’s life is Christ, present in his mysteries—that is to say, in the sacraments Jesus himself instituted. “The mysteries of Christ’s life are the foundations for what he would henceforth dispense in the sacraments, through the ministers of his Church, for ‘what was visible in our Savior has passed over into his mysteries’.”<sup>14</sup>

The public prayer life of the Church revolves around the sacramental mysteries, especially the Holy Eucharist.<sup>15</sup> Here, in the sacraments, Christ himself acts in and through the Church to sanctify his people, to unite them in himself, and to glorify his Father.

In all, there are seven sacraments instituted by Christ: **Baptism** (by which we are freed from sin and reborn in Christ), **Confirmation** (which strengthens the baptized with a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit), the **Holy Eucharist** (the supreme sacrament, in which we are fed with the true Body and Blood of Christ and truly united with him in his perfect act of

worship), **Penance** (by which we are freed from sins committed after Baptism), the **Anointing of the Sick** (by which the sick and the dying are strengthened and united to Christ), **Holy Orders** (by which bishops, priests, and deacons are ordained to their different levels of participation in the work of teaching, governing, and sanctifying which Christ gave his Apostles), and **Matrimony** (by which Christian spouses are united until death).

The sacraments are celebrated within the liturgical sphere of the Church's life—that is, within her round of daily, weekly, seasonal, and annual public worship. Besides the Holy Eucharist and the other sacramental rites, the Church throughout the world marks each day through the Liturgy of the Hours—distinctive prayers for morning, evening, and several other fixed “hours” throughout the day. These hours consist mainly of psalms, hymns, and readings from the Bible and other traditional sources, such as the writings of the saints. “The Liturgy of the Hours...is like an extension of the Eucharistic celebration”<sup>16</sup> which sanctifies the entire day through its constant return to the one priestly prayer of Christ.

The liturgy is the most holy and effective activity in which Christians take part. In the Church's public worship—where each person is spiritually joined with Christ, with the entire Church on earth, and with all the angels and saints—Christ's own perfect sacrifice is offered to God the Father. Even when a person celebrates the liturgy without others visibly present, Christ and the whole Church pray together.

The liturgy then is rightly seen as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. It involves the presentation of man's sanctification under the guise of signs per-

ceptible by the senses and its accomplishment in ways appropriate to each of these signs. In it full public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members. From this it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of his Body which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree.<sup>17</sup>

We should note that encountering Jesus Christ and being transformed by him through the liturgy and sacraments *does not* have to mean that we have an especially emotional experience every time we participate in the Church's worship. It is possible that our personal "experience" of the liturgy be unremarkable, dry, or even boring. The liturgy, in its veiled reality, does not in essence depend on our "experience" for its worth or power. Even so, it is also true that we will normally benefit most from participating in the liturgy when we lay aside distractions and give our full attention to the liturgy, listening with devotion. And excellent music and preaching in a community that lives the gospel is truly uplifting to the spirit. Often enough, the fruit of our regular participation in the liturgy will be detected over a long period of time, and it is only *afterwards* that we see, in retrospect, something of how Christ drew so near to us.

## **Sacred Scripture**

Whether in the liturgy or in private reading, Christians also hear and encounter Jesus Christ in the Bible. Indeed, our undying interest in the Bible arises from the fact that it is a single book authored by God about Christ.

All Sacred Scripture is but one book, and this one book is Christ, 'because all divine Scripture speaks of Christ, and all divine Scripture is fulfilled in Christ.'<sup>18</sup>

Obviously, God used human authors and languages to write the Scriptures. (This is why it is useful to know about life in the ancient world, to appreciate the Bible's original languages, and to work on understanding what the inspired human writers had in mind. And since the texts of the Bible were handed down over many generations, it is useful to study the development and transmission of the texts as well.) However, to interpret Scripture correctly and to grasp what its main author—God—wants to show to us, we must observe, among others, three practical criteria.

First, we must take the Bible as a whole and not interpret passages in isolation. Second, we must read the Bible in its proper light, namely the living tradition of the Church—this means we cannot expect to understand the Bible apart from the Church for whom it was written. Third, we must remember how the whole Christian faith is integrated, and avoid stressing one point to the detriment of the balanced whole of the Gospel.<sup>19</sup>

Receiving the Bible in this way, we look through the written pages of Scripture to the person, Christ, whom the Bible reveals. This revelation is not “automatic” or the product of merely human intellectual striving—instead, it is something God accomplishes by means of the Scriptures as they are read in faith. For this reason it is true to say that

the Christian faith is not a “religion of the book.” Christianity is the religion of the “Word” of God, a word which is “not a written and mute word, but the

Word which is incarnate and living.” If the Scriptures are not to remain a dead letter, Christ, the eternal Word of the living God, must, through the Holy Spirit, “open [our] minds to understand the Scriptures.”<sup>20</sup>

## **Charity**

Since God’s plan to save us involves uniting us with himself and with each other in him, it should come as no surprise that getting to know Christ requires love for other people. Although this love is active in prayer and good will alone (indeed, if one is gravely ill or stranded on a desert island, there may be few other ways to love), it is normally effective in practical goodness and mercy toward people around us. And while “charity begins at home,” Christ tells us to make a point of loving sinners and those in need.

When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those on his right hand, “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink?

And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?” And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?” Then he will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me” (Mt 25:31–45).

## **Asceticism**

The word “asceticism” refers to *ascesis*, that is, “exercise” or “training”—as in the daily discipline of athletes, soldiers, and everyone devoted to demanding work (see 2 Tm 2:4–7). While intimacy with Christ does not require any unusual physical prowess, we do need to gain, by practice and God’s grace, a holy self-mastery. Thanks to sin and human frailty, we all have unruly appetites and desires that, left unchecked, will constantly pull us away from a life of prayer and holiness.

Scripture and tradition recommend numerous forms of asceticism—sometimes as penances (practiced in sorrow for sin), but always as means of remaining attentive to God. In particular, the New Testament gives us examples of fasting, vigils (i.e., spending nights or the very early morning in prayer), celibacy, penitential dress, and various deprivations.<sup>21</sup>

Even more important than voluntary self-denial is our acceptance of hardships and difficulties that come unsought, in the workings of Divine Providence.<sup>22</sup> By accepting and enduring all that God may ask us to suffer, we follow Christ's own example and instructions, and so are purified and detached from the things of this life.

The ultimate asceticism, of course, is to surrender one's very life at the time of death, especially when love or fidelity to God's will is at stake. While we ought to pray for deliverance from evil, we must at the same time be willing to say with Jesus, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Mt 26:39).

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ... It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ... For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but

rather be healed. Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fail to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' spring up and cause trouble, and by it the many become defiled; that no one be immoral or irreligious like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal (Heb 12:3–16).

### **“THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE”**

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (Jn 8:31–32).

Knowing the truth *about* Christ is inseparable from knowing Christ who *is* the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jn 14:6).

In this life, we do not have the joy of seeing Jesus Christ face to face. In his Church, however, we hear him preached, we are joined to him in the sacraments—especially the Holy Eucharist, where Christ feeds us with his own true Body and Blood—and we learn the way of life that leads to the vision of love that never ends. For now, we know and love Christ incompletely, looking forward to the day when God’s gifts and sacraments will be replaced with the vision of God himself: *For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face* (1 Cor 13:12).

## Suggested Reading

St. Athanasius. *On the Incarnation*. St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1977.

G. K. Chesterton. *The Everlasting Man*. Ignatius Press, 1993.

Guardini, Romano. *The Lord*. Regnery Publications, 1996.

Ratzinger, Joseph. *Behold the Pierced One*. Ignatius Press, 1987.

Sheed, Frank J. *To Know Christ Jesus*. Ignatius Press, 1992.

Sheen, Fulton J. *Life of Christ*. Doubleday Image, 1977.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In most English translations, James and the others are called the “brothers” or “brethren” of Jesus. The Greek word *adelphoi* does not denote only “full blood brothers,” but is like our word “relatives” or “kinsfolk”—Christ’s *brethren* belonged to his *family* in a broad sense.

<sup>2</sup> Tragically, the result was a schism (a division in the Church) that continues to the present day. The “Oriental Orthodox” or “non-Chalcedonian Orthodox”—those who refused to accept the judgment of the Council of Chalcedon—were separated from the rest of the Church. In modern times, Catholic and Oriental Orthodox bishops and theologians, including Pope John Paul II, have agreed that this ancient argument is more a matter of doctrinal custom or phrasing than of any substantial difference in faith. The Oriental Orthodox include the Coptic, Ethiopian, Armenian, Syrian, and Malankara Indian Orthodox Churches, all of which continue in the Apostolic Tradition but are not in complete union with the Catholic Church.

<sup>3</sup> Council of Chalcedon, DS 301–2. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 467. The scriptural quotation in the first paragraph is from Heb 4:15. The word “hypostasis” is somewhat ambiguous, and should here be understood as “individual” (rather than “substance”).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. St. Augustine, *On the Trinity* I. III. 5. In this booklet, we cannot offer a thorough overview of the doctrine of the Trinity—a short summary of this teaching is needed, however, to understand who Christ is.

<sup>5</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 687.

<sup>6</sup> St. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 15.36. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 736.

<sup>7</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 733. Cf. 1 Jn 4:8, 16; Rom 5:5.

<sup>8</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration “*Dominus Iesus*,” *On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, n. 12 (cf. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio* nn. 28–29).

<sup>9</sup> Here we are speaking of divine mysteries, i.e., things we understand thanks to God’s sharing his own knowledge with us through revelation. By “mystery,” then, we do not mean a *puzzle*.

<sup>10</sup> God is said to be the primary author of Scripture, and Matthew, Mark, Luke and John said to be the (secondary) instrumental causes of Scripture in the same way that I am said to be the primary author and a pen the instrumental cause when I write a letter. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John did not fall into a trance and write ignorantly. But God is so great that He can use free rational agents with their own personal limitations as instruments for his own message.

<sup>11</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 683.

<sup>12</sup> Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* n. 9; cf. Acts 10:35, 1 Cor 11:25. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 836.

<sup>13</sup> Pope Pius XII, Encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 244.

<sup>14</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1115. Cf. St. Leo the Great, *Sermon* 74, 2.

<sup>15</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1113.

<sup>16</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1178.

<sup>17</sup> Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Sacrosanctum concilium*, 7 § 2-3. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1070.

<sup>18</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 134. Cf. Hugh of St. Victor, *De arca Noe* 2, 8-9.

<sup>19</sup> See the Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Dei Verbum* 12, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* nn. 112–114.

<sup>20</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 108. Cf. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *S. missus est hom.* 4, 11; Lk 24:45.

<sup>21</sup> Examples include Christ (cf. Mt 4:2, 21:17; Mk 1:35; Lk 6:12, 21:37), St. John the Baptist (cf. Mt 3:1–4; Mk 1:4–6), Anna the Prophetess (Lk 2:26–37), and St. Paul (Acts 13:1–3, 14:23, 16:25; 1 Cor 9:27, 1 Thes 3:10). See also Mt 10:9–10, 26:41; Mk 6:8–9, 13:37; Lk 14:33, 21:36; Heb 11:37b–38; 1 Pet 4:7, etc.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Mt 5:38–41, 2 Cor 6:4–5, Heb 11:35b–37a, etc.