

THE BEGINNING OF THE MIDDLE

INCARNATION AND INFANCY (Nos. 456–534)



SESSION OBJECTIVES

- This session consists of three parts: the Incarnation, Mary, and the birth and infancy of Christ (the "hidden life"). After this session, you should understand ...
- The basics of the Christological doctrines: what we know to be true about Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Trinity, true God and true man.
- The basics of Mariology: what we know to be true about Mary, the Mother of Jesus and "Dawn of the Sunrise"
- The mysteries of the hidden life: the birth and infancy of Jesus and the role these played in God's plan of salvation.

GETTING YOUR BEARINGS

This session picks up where we left off last time. Recall that the last session ended with an introduction to Jesus as Christ, Son of God, and Lord. That last title identified Jesus with the eternal God (*YHWH*), who had revealed himself to the Jewish people in the economy of the Old Testament. He is the eternal God, the Lord.

In this session we will begin with the point at which that eternal God enters time, the Incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Recall also that the *Catechism* says of him that he is "the key, the center, and the purpose of the whole of man's history" (No. 450). It is for that reason that this session is titled "The Beginning of the Middle:"

As Catholics, we believe that the most important event of human history comes not at its beginning, nor at its end (with all due attention to the importance of the Creation and the end of time), but at its middle. As Israel always looked forward to its Messiah, the new Israel of God, the Church always looks backward to that important moment when God became one of us.

The Church and Mary

Non-Catholic critics sometimes scoff at the Church's Marian dogmas-especially those of the Immaculate Conception (solemnly proclaimed in 1854) and the Assumption of Mary (proclaimed in 1950), because these two dogmas were solemnly defined in recent centuries. Such critics accuse recent popes as having "made up" or invented these "non-biblical" beliefs. Both teachings, however, date from the very earliest days of the Christian Faith.

Just as a mighty oak traces its beginning to a tiny acorn, these Marian beliefs trace their origins to the Faith of the early Church. Early Church fathers and doctors such as Saints Ambrose and Anselm defended Mary's sinlessness (or Immaculate Conception). Still others defended Mary's Assumption as a natural consequence of the Immaculate Conception. As far back as the year 431, following the Council of Ephesus, the Eastern-rite churches have favored calling Mary's Assumption her *dormition* (or "falling asleep").

The important point here is that truths regarding Mary can be based only on what the Church believes and understands about Christ. In other words, such teachings shine new light on our faith in Christ.

In the Apostles' Creed, we profess, "I believe ... in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord ..." and then go on to profess the story of Christ "in miniature." That drama has three main acts: his conception and birth, his passion and death, and his resurrection and ascension.

As we will see in this session, those major moments in the working out of God's plan are the central events of human history. Every event-past, present, and future-is recorded in relation to its proximity to this crucial period: The calendar recognizes this in its division into BC ("before Christ") and AD (*anno Domini*, "in the year of our Lord"). Christians recognize the centrality of these events by constantly referring back to them in prayerful reflection and worship.

In an earlier session, we noted that the catechesis on creation is "... decisive for the meaning and orientation of our life and actions" (No. 282). In this session, we will find that the catechesis on our re-creation in Christ is even more decisive. In fact, the full significance of the Fall can be understood only when we see the price that Jesus paid to undo the effects of it. And, as St. Paul makes clear in chapter five of his letter to the Romans, the passion of Christ is itself best understood in light of the failure of Adam. In short, Jesus is the answer to the question the creation story poses.

This is particularly true of the doctrine of the Incarnation, of God's becoming man, which the *Catechism* refers to as "... the distinctive sign of Christian faith" (No. 463). The Incarnation is vital because it is through our humanity that Christ saves us. The Church fathers noted that only those parts of us that Christ assumed could be redeemed. God "took on flesh;" became fully human, became "one of us;" in order to save us. In short, his full humanity ensures the full redemption of humanity.

This session will also explore the birth and early years of Jesus' life. Though very little is said about these "hidden years" in the Bible, they show, perhaps even better than the period of his public ministry, that Jesus really became one of us. He shares with us the helplessness of infancy and the drudgery of ordinary daily life. He touches all these parts of our lives and makes them possible moments of grace by taking them to himself and healing and renewing them. This is part of what St. Paul, and after him St. Irenaeus, meant by saying that Jesus "recapitulated" the whole

of human history and life. By "recapitulating;" or "summing up;" the whole of our history from the "middle" of that history, Jesus reaches out in both directions, from the remote past to the distant future, and brings the whole story into focus.

For Catholics, progress is not merely the newest thing but an ever-increasing unfolding of those old events that we always look to at the center of history. Although this session begins with important doctrinal declarations about the union of God and man in Christ, these doctrines percolate up out of the story of our salvation, which is already present in the economic form of the Creed (Age of the Father Age of the Son Age of the Spirit).

After the brief explanation of who and what Jesus is (Christ, Son, and Lord) that we saw in the last session, we return to the story of the Incarnation, to which Mary consents: "Let it be [done] to me according to your word:" (see Luke 1:38). The story is in many ways the key thing. While it is essential that we know the doctrine of Christ so as to have a properly informed faith, that doctrine will make more sense to us if we can see it as rising out of the story of God's immense love for us that we find in the Bible.

BEGIN WITH PRAYER

*This week, read Colossians 1:15-20, Philippians 2:5-11, and Ephesians 1:3-10.
Consider making a few of the verses in these passages the subject of a short prayer each day this week.*

Myth: The Immaculate Conception refers to the conception of Jesus or his virgin birth.

In an earlier session, we mentioned that the Catholic Faith would grow your vocabulary. Here's another case in point.

The Immaculate Conception refers to Mary's conception in the womb of her mother, St. Anne. Mary was conceived in the natural way, but as Pope Pius IX proclaimed in 1854, due to a "singular grace and privilege of almighty God;" she was free from the stain of original sin from the first moment of her conception¹ (see No. 491). Thus, Mary is said to be "immaculate" (literally, "without stain").

Jesus' conception in the womb of Mary is known as the Incarnation, when the second Person of the Trinity took on a true human nature. Jesus was conceived in Mary's womb by the power of the Holy Spirit. The words of the archangel Gabriel to Mary at the annunciation are an affirmation of her Immaculate Conception: "Hail, full of grace ..." (Luke 1:28).

The Immaculate Conception prepared Mary in an exalted fashion to receive the Son of God. Her body became a tabernacle for the incarnate Christ. This is why Mary is called the "new" Ark of the Covenant, as well as the Mother of God (in Greek, Theotokos, "God-bearer").

READING THE CATECHISM

The presentation for Session Seven will cover *Catechism* Nos. 456-534. If your time is limited, you might want to begin with the essential paragraphs for this session: 456-461, 463,464,470,473, 480-482, 484,487, 489,490,491,495,496,498,499,500,506,507,510,515-518,and521-524.

GLOSSARY TERMS

Hypostatic Union

The technical term in Christology (the theology of Christ) that refers to the manner of the union between the full humanity and full divinity of Christ. After much discussion and dispute in early Church councils, the Greek term *hypostasis* came to be used to mean "person" (*persona* in Latin and *prosopon* [literally "face"] in Greek) and so to refer to the seat of the union of the two natures in Christ. The orthodox formula of the Church's faith in this union of the two natures is that they are united in the Person (*hypostasis*) of the divine Son. So this union of the two is called a "hypostatic" union. A person is, by definition, a unique individual, and so this doctrine means that Christ is not two individuals (a divine one and a human one) loosely joined, but one person who combines in himself the two natures and two ways of acting, divine and human.

Recapitulate

This term, highlighted in Nos. 518 and 538 in the *Catechism*, is drawn from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians 1:10. There, it is used to explain the way in which Christ is able "to sum up" (New American Bible [NAB] translation of the New Testament) or "unite all things" (Revised Standard translation of the New Testament) in himself. Since Jesus is the incarnate second Person of the Trinity, "through whom all things were made" (as we say in the Creed), he is the Father's pattern or plan for everything in creation, as well as the Father's plan for our redemption or re-creation in grace. In him, everything that is human, except sin, has been joined to the divine life of God and so made new and meaningful in him. All of human history is summed up in him because he is the very plan of God for human perfection in grace. If we accept his grace, won for us on the cross and distributed in the sacraments, then we can be joined mystically to him in the Body of Christ and so "... continue to accomplish in ourselves the stages of Jesus' life and his mysteries ..." (No. 521).

Theotokos

Meaning "God-bearer" (Greek). This term is applied to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, as a way of highlighting that God and man are really joined in Christ. Because God and man are fully united in Jesus, what can be said of the one nature in him can be said of the other, too. So we can really say that the Word, the Son of God, was born and died, even though his divine nature is eternal and so without beginning or end. To make clear that we are not simply saying, for example, that God was born (or came into being only at one point in time, which is not true of his divinity), we add the important phrase "according to the flesh"² (No. 466) when speaking of the way in which the divine nature is mysteriously joined to these human events in Jesus' Incarnation. So in Jesus, God was really born and died, "according to the flesh:'

HOMEWORK QUESTIONS Name: _____

From the *Catechism* Nos. 456-483

1. What are the four reasons "the Word became flesh"?

2. At what council was Mary proclaimed "Mother of God"?

3. The Son of God is like us in all things except what?

4. What is considered the chief sign and symbol of the love of the divine Redeemer?

From the *Catechism* Nos. 484-511

5. With what title did the angel Gabriel salute Mary, a title that has become the basis for our understanding of the Immaculate Conception?

6. By what was the "... knot of Eve's disobedience ..." untied?

7. Who were the "brothers of Jesus" mentioned in the Bible?

8. Of what is Mary"... the symbol and most perfect realization ..."?

From the *Catechism* Nos. 512-534

9. Why were the events captured in the Gospels set down there?

10. The *Catechism* uses three words beginning with *R* to describe the mysteries of Christ's life. What are they?

11. To what desire of St. John the Baptist does the Church unite herself?

12. What three lessons did the home of Nazareth provide?

PRESENTATION OUTLINE

THE BEGINNING OF THE MIDDLE INCARNATION AND INFANCY (Nos. 456-534)

I. The Incarnation: True God and True Man

A. "Why Did the Word Become Flesh?" (see No. 456)

1. Four reasons:

a. "[I]n order to save us ..." (No. 457)

b. That "... we might know God's love ..." (No. 458)

c. "[T]o be our model of holiness ..." (No. 459)

d. "[T]o make us *'partakers of the divine nature'*" (2 Pet 1:4.) (*theosis*) (No. 460)

2. These four reasons can be correlated with the four pillars:

a. To save us = Pillar 2, Sacraments

b. To know God's love = Pillar 1, The Creed

c. Model of holiness = Pillar 3, The Moral Life

d. Partakers in divine nature = Pillar 4, Prayer

B. The doctrine of the Incarnation

1. Three Christological mistakes:

a. Denial of the full divinity of Christ

b. Denial of the full humanity of Christ

- c. Denial of the real (personal) union of the two natures
2. Three Christological truths:
 - a. He is true God
 - b. He is true man
 - c. He is the union of the divine nature and a human nature in the person of the divine Son
3. "That which is not assumed is not healed" (Gregory of Nazianzus)
 4. Christological heresies (see Nos. 464-473)
 5. "True God and True Man" (No. 464)
 - a. Christ is true God, "begotten, not made;" and is consubstantial ("*homoousios*") with the Father (No. 465)
 - b. Christ is true man; revealed by facts of his human life
 6. In Christ, his true human nature united with second Person of Trinity, there is no loss of his humanity
 - a. Christ's "... human nature was assumed, not absorbed ..." (No. 470)
 - b. He "... expresses humanly the divine ways of the Trinity ..." (No. 470)
 - c. Christ's human soul "... endowed with a true human knowledge ..." (No. 472)
 - d. Jesus' human nature "... *by its union with the Word*, knew ... everything that pertains to God:" (No. 473)
 - e. Jesus knew what was in the hearts of men (see No. 473)

- f. What Jesus did not know in his human knowledge, he was not sent to reveal-"only the Father knows" (Matthew 24:36-see No. 474)
 - g. Jesus"... gave himself up for each one of us ..." (No. 478)
7. Hypostatic union (see No. 470-475)
- a. Refers to the union of the human and divine natures in the one divine Person of Christ
 - b. Christ is a divine Person, the second Person of the Trinity (see No. 480)
 - c. *Person* refers to "who;" it conveys identity; nature refers to "what"
 - d. Distinction between the two natures is not abolished by their union
 - e. Union of two natures, divine and human, in one *prosopon* and one *hypostasis* (Council of Chalcedon, AD 451)

II. Mary: The Dawn of the Sunrise

- A. Mary is the fulfillment of all the heroic Old Testament feminine figures (see No. 489). She has three roles:
 - 1. Daughter of the Father
 - 2. Mother of the Son
 - 3. Spouse of the Spirit
- B. Marian dogmas
 - 1. Immaculate Conception (see No. 491)
 - 2. Divine Motherhood (*Theotokos*, Greek "God-bearer"; see No. 495)
 - 3. Perpetual Virginity (see No. 496)

4. Assumption treated later in the *Catechism* (see No. 963ff)

III. The Mysteries of Christ's Life

- A. The whole life of Christ, "his words and deeds;" are revelation (see No. 516), redemption (see No. 517), and recapitulation (see No. 518)
- B. Christ "recapitulates" (Ephesians 1:9) human history, reorienting it toward a return to the Father.
 1. St. John Eudes quote (see No. 521)
 2. As members of his Mystical Body, the Church, we are called to continue Christ's work
- C. Birth and infancy
 1. The *Catechism* lists the mysteries
 - a. The preparations (see Nos. 522-524)
 - b. The Christmas mystery (see Nos. 525-526)
 - c. The mysteries of Jesus' infancy (see Nos. 527-530)
 - d. The mysteries of Jesus' hidden life (see Nos. 531-534)
 2. "Hidden life [school] at Nazareth"-For thirty years Jesus did the ordinary things any man would do (see No. 533)
 3. The family and the workbench are the ordinary places for the formation of saints (Paul VI; see No. 533)

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The doctrine of the Incarnation provides an answer to the fundamental question about who Jesus is. He is literally "God in the flesh." Not everyone is willing to admit that Jesus is God, and often he is described as simply "a good man." How might you describe to someone like this the difference that it makes in your life that Jesus was not only a good man, but God himself, the Second Person of the Trinity?
2. The *Catechism* indicates, "What the Catholic faith believes about Mary is based on what it believes about Christ, and what it teaches about Mary illumines in turn its faith in Christ" (No. 487). For example, although the title "Mother of God" (No. 509) refers to Mary, it tells us as much about the divinity and true humanity of her Son as it does about her unique role in God's plan of salvation. What do the other doctrines of Mary tell us about Jesus? In what ways does your devotion to our Lady lead you into a deeper relationship with her Son?
3. Mary's obedience is exemplified by her response to the angel Gabriel's announcement, her *fiat*." "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be [done] to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38, see No. 494). In what ways do you follow Mary's model of obedience in your response to God's requests, even when a particular request doesn't make sense at the time?
4. Mary's perpetual virginity hearkens to a day when celibacy "for the sake of the kingdom" was held in higher esteem than it seems to be held in today's society. In what ways can you exercise the virtue of chastity, according to your state in life, in order to be a witness to a world in need of hope?
5. "The hidden life at Nazareth allows everyone to enter into fellowship with Jesus by the most ordinary events of daily life ..." (No. 533). In what ways do you strive to grow closer to Jesus through the ordinary tasks of daily life?
6. The *Catechism* describes the mysteries of Jesus' life as a recapitulation (see No. 518) and a marvelous exchange (see No. 526). He came not only to be a model for us, but to live in us and to make it possible for us to live in him (see No. 521). How have you experienced this kind of holy exchange in your life, either alone or in the company of other believers? What does it mean to have life in Christ?