

# "HE WAS CONCEIVED BY THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY"

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Last month we spoke of the Incarnation, God taking on human flesh and becoming man, so that we might share in His life. In the words of Mary herself; "How can this be...?" What means did God use to bring this about and how did the Church come to an understanding of this great truth? The idea that Jesus was both fully God and fully man was the subject of numerous heresies in the early Church and which continue even today in religious sects of various kinds. In fact, belief in the true Incarnation of the Son of God is so important that the catechism tells us it is the "distinctive sign of Christian faith". (CCC 463) In other words, we would not consider "Jehovah's Witness" or "Mormon" sects to be Christian because they do not adhere to this central teaching of the Church. Paragraphs 465-468 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church describe a number of the first heresies that were confronted by the Church. Very early on a Gnostic Docetism developed which denied Christ's true humanity. By the time of the first ecumenical council of Nicaea in 325, it also became necessary for the Church to define Christ's divinity by confessing in the Nicene Creed that He was "begotten, not made, of the same substance as the Father". This was in response to Arianism, which denied the divinity of Christ. The heresies continued with the Nestorians, who professed that Jesus was born as a human person who was then joined to the divine person of God's Son. The Council of Ephesus in 431 responded by proclaiming that Jesus was truly God from the moment of His conception in

Mary's womb and because of this Mary was given the title "Mother of God". Also in the same century, the Monophysites held that the human nature ceased to exist in Christ when the divine person of God's son assumed it. This brought forth from the fourth ecumenical council at Chalcedon in 451 the defining statement reprinted on page 2. But on what does the Church base her understanding of the Incarnation? The description of the Annunciation in sacred scripture (Luke 1:26-36) illuminates and supports much of what the Church teaches. When Mary, confronted with the prospect of bearing a child, asked "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" The angel answered "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...". His conception would be truly supernatural. Totally the work of the Holy Spirit. Mary would remain a virgin and fulfill the prophesy of Isaiah "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son" (Isa 7:14) This would also lead the Church to profess Mary's "perpetual virginity". Even Christ's birth would not destroy her virginal integrity. It would be a miraculous birth. With this divine origin, we can see why St. Paul would eventually explain to the Colossians that the "fullness of the deity" dwelled in Christ. (Col 2:9) This is why we profess in the Nicene Creed that Jesus is "one in being with the Father". But what about His humanity? Jesus was born of a woman, Scripture tells us. A woman "full of grace" as the angel confessed, but nonetheless a

woman created by God and fully human just as we are. This gave Christ his humanity. He was fully human, body and soul, with the human soul's operations of intellect and will. This is why He could "express humanly the divine ways of the Trinity" (CCC 470) and He would also grow and "increase in wisdom and stature". (Luke 2:52) This humanity flowed from the humanity of Mary. But the term "full of grace" indicates a uniqueness in Mary as well. How could this be, we might ask again? How could this woman, the mother of our redeemer, be full of grace before the act of redemption? Here is where the Church comes to understand the Immaculate Conception. (page 2) Mary was prepared from her conception, by the grace of God and the merits of her Son, to be without the stain of sin. By this grace she would conform her will to his with the words "let it be done to me according to your Word". How else, but by God's grace, could a young woman in her position, respond with those words. How else, buy by God's grace, can we respond as well. We who are a redeemed and faith filled people of God. May Jesus, the Son of God and Son of Mary, continue to lead us to a deeper understanding of that faith and how we are to live it each day of our lives. May the same Holy Spirit who conceived Jesus in His mother's womb fill us with divine life and grace so that we might humanly manifest the life of Christ to others. Mother Mary, pray for us. Amen!

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## Catechism of the Catholic Church

Jesus Christ possesses two natures, one divine and the other human, not confused, but united in the one person of God's Son. Christ, being true God and true man, has a human intellect and will, perfectly attuned and subject to his divine intellect and divine will, which he has in common with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Incarnation is therefore the mystery of the wonderful union of the divine and human natures in the one person of the Word.

**-CCC 481-483**

Through the centuries the Church has become ever more aware that Mary, "full of grace" through God, was redeemed

from the moment of her conception. That is what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception confesses, as Pope Pius IX proclaimed in 1854: "The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin."

**-CCC 491**

The deepening of faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to confess Mary's real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made man. In fact, Christ's birth "did not

diminish his mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it." And so he liturgy of the Church celebrates Mary as *Aeiparthenos*, the "Ever-virgin." Against this doctrine the objection is sometimes raised that the Bible mentions brothers and sisters of Jesus. The Church has always understood these passages as not referring to other children of the Virgin Mary. In fact James and Joseph, "brothers of Jesus," are the sons of another Mary, a disciple of Christ, whom St. Matthew significantly calls "the other Mary." They are close relations of Jesus, according to an Old Testament expression.

**-CCC 499-500**

## The Council Speaks

Following the holy Fathers, we unanimously teach and confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: he 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. (Fourth Ecumenical Council, Chalcedon 451)

## Sacred Scripture

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city



of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and

bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end." And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. (Luke 1:26-35)

## Thoughtful Questions

- How does the Incarnation (God becoming man) affect my life, my humanity?
- Do I see Mary as my mother? Do I foster a devotion to the Blessed Mother?
- Could I explain the Incarnation or Immaculate Conception to someone?