

The Incarnation

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

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

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

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



Madonna and Child, by Bartolomé Murillo, 1617-1682

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

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

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

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

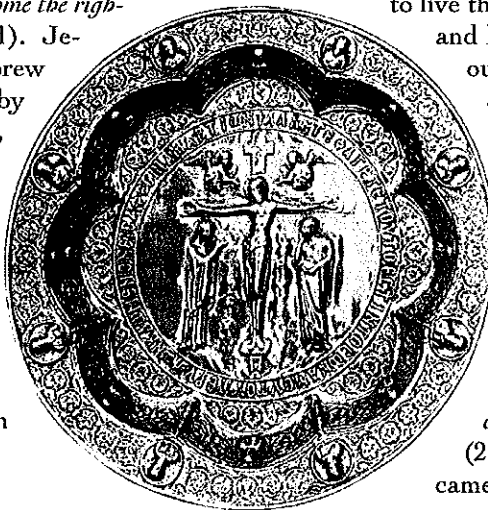
So that all men and women will know God's love

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

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

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

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



Crucifixion depicted on silver paten, 11th century

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

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

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

nation of the Son of God in a similar light: "The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods"² (CCC 460).

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

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

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

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

² St. Thomas Aquinas, Opusc. 57:1-4

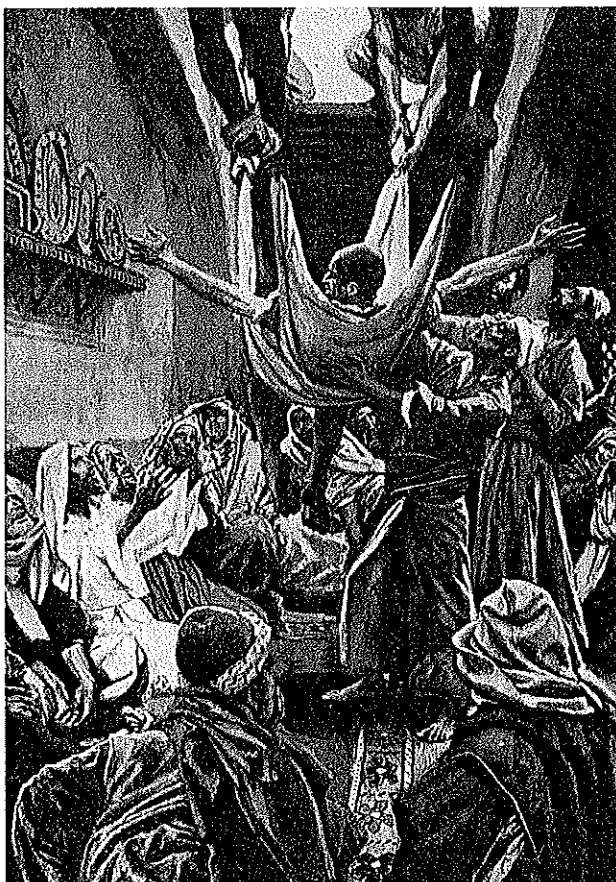
True God and True Man

But who do you say that I am? ~ Matthew 16:15

THE FOUR Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and the remaining books of the New Testament, give us a wealth of information about Jesus Christ, a man born into history at a specific place and specific time, as the one promised from the beginning (see Gn 3:15) to be our savior, and yet who was also truly God, one in being with the Father.

The Witness of Scripture

It is not difficult to find Scripture passages attesting either to Jesus' identity as God or to his true humanity. The Gospel of John states unambiguously, from the very beginning, that Jesus was God: *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"* (Jn 1:1). Several verses later, John writes that God has visited his people in human form: *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us"* (Jn 1:14; see also 1 Jn 4:2). "Lord," the normal substitute for the unspoken and unpronounced Name of God in the Old Testament — YHWH in the Hebrew script (which used only consonants) — was used in the Gospels and other books of the New Testament for both the Father and for Jesus, both by Jesus himself (see Mt 7:21-22; Mk 5:19; Jn 13:14) and by his followers (see Mt 8:25; Mt 9:28; Mt 14:28-30; Mk 16:19-20; Lk 5:8; Lk 7:19; Lk 10:1; Jn 9:38; Jn 11:27; Jn 20:28; 1 Cor 1:3; 1 Cor 8:6; Phil 2:11; Jude v 4; Rv 17:14).



The palsied man let down through the roof, by James Tissot, 1836-1902

"He was God, and he died, as a human dies!"

invited Thomas to see and touch the wounds from his crucifixion: *"Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing"* (Jn 20:27). Thomas' response was worship: *"My Lord and my God!"* (Jn 20:28). Scribes — professional scholars — indirectly also acknowledged Jesus' divinity, when they witnessed a miracle of healing. Before he healed a paralytic, Jesus forgave his sins, and the scribes said, in their hearts, *"Who can forgive sins but God alone?"* (Mk 2:7). Jesus rarely made an outright claim to his divinity in public, but during a long dialogue that probably occurred in the Temple in Jerusalem, he eventually told his hearers, *"before Abraham was, I am"* (Jn 8:58), claiming for himself the

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews states that Jesus was truly human: *"For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin"* (Heb 4:15).

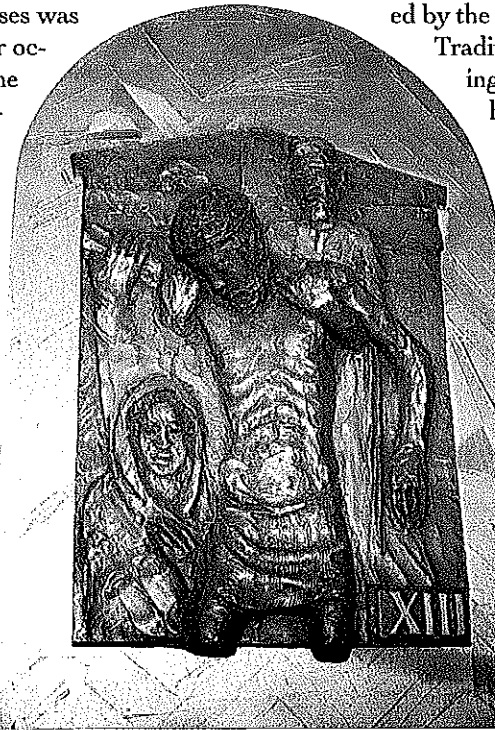
The apostles Peter and Thomas explicitly recognized Jesus' divinity while he was on earth. When Jesus asked the apostles who they thought he was, Peter, replying for the group, exclaimed: *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"* (Mt 16:16). Following Jesus' Resurrection from the dead, Thomas would not believe his fellow apostles' testimony but had to see for himself. When Jesus appeared to the company of the apostles, including Thomas, he

very name that God had told Moses was his (see Ex 3:14-15). On another occasion, when he was teaching in the Temple, he told them: "I and the Father are one" (Jn 10:30). The reaction of his hearers was the same in both instances: they tried to stone him, the prescribed punishment for blasphemy.

And yet he died! He was God, and he died, as a human dies (see Mk 15:37)! The Gospels describe in detail the preparations for burial. The Gospel of Matthew describes the efforts of the chief priests and Pharisees to ensure that no claim of resurrection could be made, by having the Roman governor set a guard on Jesus' tomb (see Mt 27:62-66). And all four Gospels describe the fact of Jesus' Resurrection from the dead, although the event itself was not witnessed, since even the Roman guards were so frightened by the accompanying earthquake and terrifying appearance of an angel that they "became like dead men" (Mt 28:4). The fact that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead was, however, attested to by hundreds of witnesses, including those who touched him, such as Thomas, those who walked and talked with him (see Lk 24:13-35), those who ate with him (see Lk 24:41-43), and those for whom he cooked a breakfast of grilled fish and bread at the shore of the Sea of Galilee (see Jn 21:4-14).

Catholic Doctrines about Jesus' Identity

During the first few centuries of Christianity, a great deal of effort was put into how to understand Jesus as God and as man. Inevitably, some thinkers got it wrong and began teaching heresy (wrong doctrine). The Church authoritatively taught correct doctrine, in the process developing the theological vocabulary and creed that we still use today. This doctrine is completely based on Scripture, as interpret-



Jesus is taken down from the Cross; 13th Station of the Cross in St. Teresa of Avila Church in Washington, DC

ed by the Church in light of its Apostolic Tradition — that is, the understanding of the Scriptures that has been handed down from the apostles themselves to every succeeding generation of popes and bishops. In this way, the constant teaching of the Church from the beginning was precisely defined. Although heresies never entirely disappear — there are contemporary versions of nearly all of them — the doctrine that Jesus is true God and true man is the common bedrock of Christian belief today.

The doctrines about Jesus' identity are as follows:

- ❖ Jesus has two complete natures, divine and human, each with an intellect and a will. His human soul and mind could grow and learn as could any human soul and mind (see Lk 2:52), yet he always knew he was God, united with his Father (see Lk 2:49). He could penetrate the secret thoughts of human hearts (see Mk 2:8; Jn 2:25; Jn 6:61). At times, when he appeared not to know something, we learn elsewhere that he was not sent to reveal it (see Mk 13:32 and Acts 1:7).
 - ❖ Jesus is only one person, the divine Person, the Son of God, who is coequal with God the Father and has exactly the same nature as God the Father (and God the Holy Spirit).
 - ❖ The second person of the Trinity is begotten, not created, and is therefore not a creature or a "lesser God."
 - ❖ The human and divine natures of Jesus are inseparably joined in the one divine Person.
- The heresies that developed over the centuries about Jesus generally fall into four groups: that Jesus was not human, or he was not fully human, or he

"The heresies about Jesus generally fall into four groups: that Jesus was not human, or he was not fully human, or he was not divine, or he was not fully divine."

was not divine, or he was not fully divine. What follows is a fuller discussion of these heresies and how they were resolved.

First Type of Heresy: Jesus is Not Human

This heresy arose very early, before the end of the 1st century (Gnosticism), and again in different forms in the 2nd and 3rd centuries (Docetism and Manichaeism) (The name of a heresy generally derives from a major characteristic of the heresy or the name of the person who originated it). With both Gnosticism and Manichaeism, the belief about Jesus' true nature was linked to a notion that there was "secret knowledge" and that the material world was, essentially, evil. Thus these heresies taught that Jesus' body was merely an illusion, since his having a material body would seem to make him part of the evil, material world. Similar to this notion was the idea that Jesus did not really suffer in the flesh, but only seemed to suffer, which was the claim of Docetism in the 2nd century. In the 5th century, this heresy arose in a new form: that Jesus had only one nature. This heresy asserted that when the divine Person assumed a human nature, it was absorbed and ceased to exist, so that only the divine one remained (Monophysitism).

Second Type of Heresy: Jesus is Not Fully Human

There were two varieties of this heresy. The first was the 4th-century claim that Jesus had no human mind, because the divine mind replaced it (Apollinarianism). The second was a 7th-century belief that Jesus had no human will, only the divine will (Monothelitism).

Third Type of Heresy: Jesus is Not Divine

This type of heresy, like the heresies that denied Jesus' humanity, arose by the end of the 1st century. The first was the assertion that he was only a man on whom the Holy Spirit came to rest at his baptism (Ebionism). In the 2nd and 3rd centuries, a variation



Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane

on this heresy claimed that Jesus became Christ (that is, the Messiah or "anointed one of God") only at his baptism and was adopted by the Father after his death on the cross (Monarchianism).

A very different way of expressing the same heresy, which also arose in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, was that God is not one in three Persons at all, but merely adopted, successively, the roles of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Modalism or Sabellianism). Finally, a heresy that nearly overwhelmed orthodoxy in the 4th century was the belief that Jesus was the first created being, and therefore not of the same substance as the Father and not eternal (Arianism).

Fourth Type of Heresy: Jesus is Not Fully Divine

Those who could not accept full Arianism nor the orthodox belief that Jesus was truly God as well as truly human developed in the 4th century a belief that he was of a similar essence as the Father, but was subordinate to him (Semi-Arianism). Others formulated the idea that Jesus was some kind of mixture of the divine and the human. Adherents of this 5th-century heresy believed that the second person of the Trinity "indwelt" the person of Jesus, making him a God-bearing man united only because both divine and human wills were morally united, so that Jesus was two persons with two natures (Nestorianism).

Triumph of the True Doctrine: Church Councils

Some heresies regarding Jesus that had developed early, such as Gnosticism and Docetism, faded as significant factors without extraordinary effort. However, the threat of Arianism in the 4th century, as well as other heresies in this and the next three centuries, required the efforts of six universal Church councils of bishops, with the pope's approval of their results, to hammer out exactly how the true doctrine should be expressed and to condemn various heresies. These councils, their dates, and the principal results of each are as follows:

"Heresies required the efforts of six Church councils to hammer out exactly how the true doctrine should be expressed."

“Denial of Jesus’ humanity makes it impossible for us to see him as our model of holiness.”

1. Nicaea, 325

✿ declared that *Jesus is fully divine, coequal and of the identical substance with the Father (homoousios in Greek and consubstantialis, that is, “consubstantial,” in Latin) and coeternal (that is, not created) with the Father*

✿ formulated most of the Nicene Creed

✿ condemned Arianism

2. Constantinople I, 381

✿ affirmed that *Jesus is fully human and has a human spirit*

✿ refined the Nicene Creed

✿ condemned Apollinarianism

3. Ephesus, 431

✿ affirmed that *Jesus has two natures, divine and human, united “hypostatically” in one divine Person — that is, he is not two persons, but one*

✿ affirmed *Mary as the Mother of God* so as to affirm the fullness of Jesus’ divinity and humanity — *Mary gave birth not to the body alone, but to the whole Person, just as in any other human birth*

✿ condemned Nestorianism

4. Chalcedon, 451

✿ affirmed that *Jesus has two natures, human and divine, united in one Person*

✿ affirmed that *Jesus’ two natures are unmixed, unchanged, undivided, and inseparable*

✿ condemned Monophysitism

5. Constantinople II, 553

✿ affirmed that *Jesus is only one Person, and that Person is one of the Trinity*

✿ affirmed that it is proper, therefore, to say that *“God was crucified and died”*

6. Constantinople III, 680-681

✿ affirmed that *Jesus has two wills, divine and human*

✿ condemned Monothelitism.

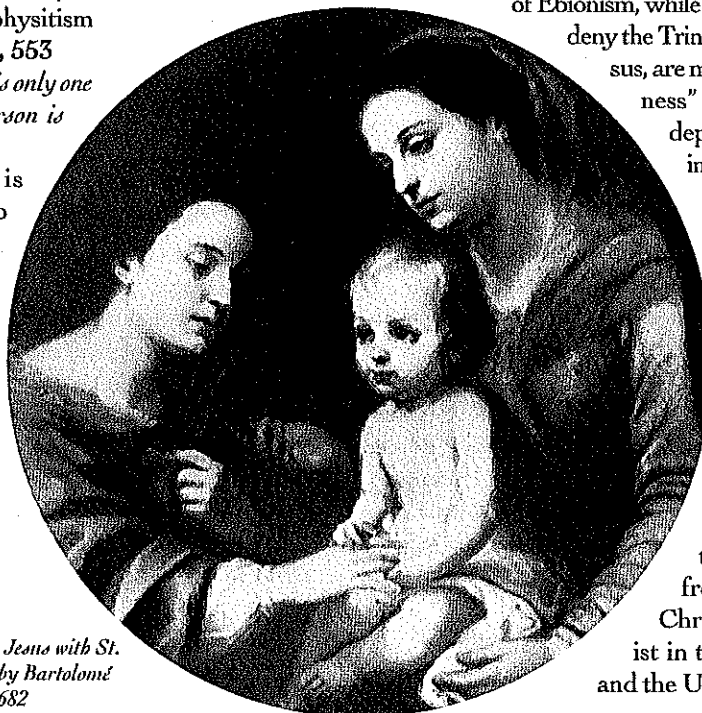
Modern Manifestations of these Heresies

Many of these ancient heresies are still current in some form today, even (and perhaps especially) when those who believe them are unaware that they do not truly affirm correct doctrine. Among the more frequently encountered are:

❖ **“Jesus is not human”**: Both Gnosticism — “secret knowledge given to only a chosen few” — and various kinds of Manichaeism — “only the spiritual is good while the material world is evil” — are common in New Age circles. These kinds of heresies lead to a denial of Jesus’ humanity and, therefore, of the reality of his crucifixion and bodily Resurrection, and its adherents are (perhaps unconsciously) Monophysites. Some fundamentalist Protestant Christians have moved — again, perhaps without realizing it — in the direction of Gnosticism or Docetism. Finally, communions that directly descend from the original Monophysite Christian communities exist in Syria as Jacobites, as Coptic Orthodox communities in Egypt and Ethiopia, and in Armenia.

❖ **“Jesus is not divine”**: Jehovah’s Witnesses are modern Arians, teaching that Jesus is not God but rather a created angelic being. Christian Scientists teach a form of Ebionism, while Unitarians, who entirely deny the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus, are modern Modalists. “Oneness” Pentecostal Christians, depending on their teaching, are either Modalists or Monarchianists. Liberal and nominal Christians often fall into Monarchianism, although they may believe that Jesus’ adoption by the Father raised him to divinity.

❖ **“Jesus is not fully divine”**: Nestorian Christian communities that directly descend from the first Nestorian Christian communities exist in the Middle East, India, and the United States.



The Virgin Mary and child Jesus with St. Catherine of Alexandria, by Bartolomé Murillo, 1617-1682

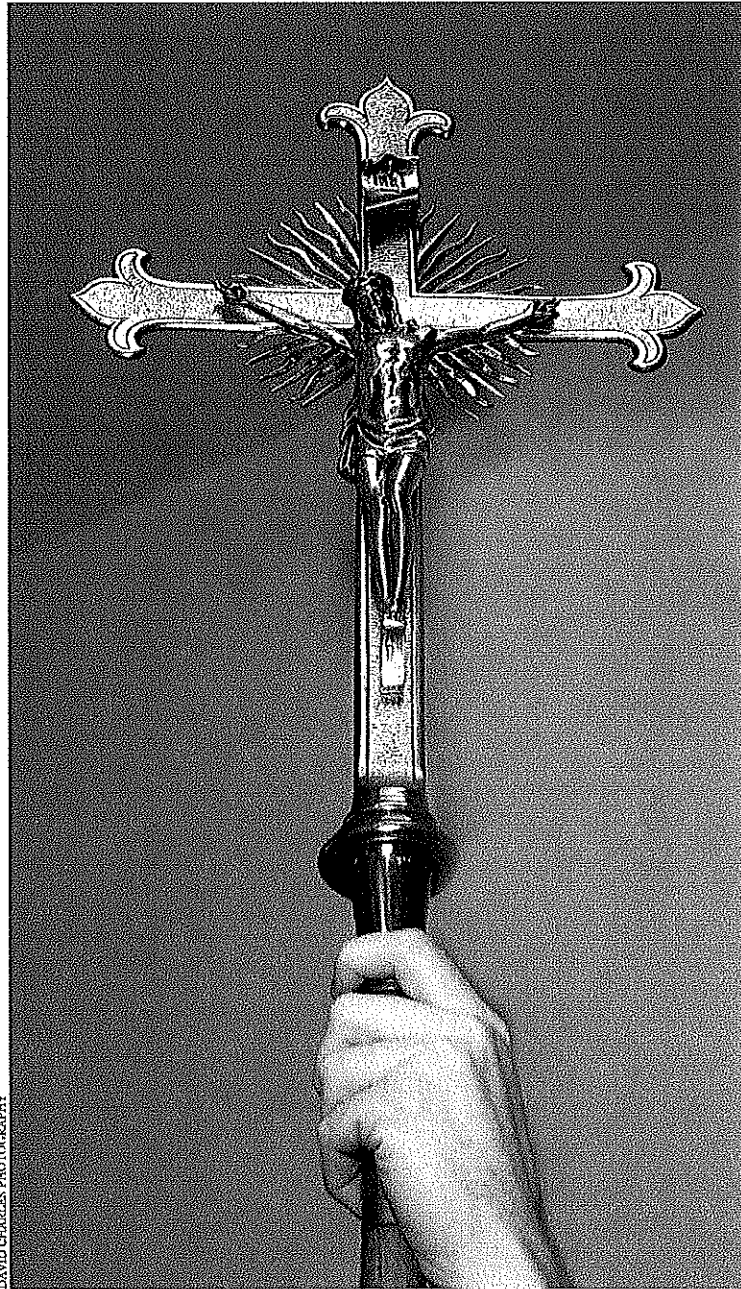
*“Denial of Jesus’ divinity
undermines his entire
life and message.”*

There are many other variations of these heresies, some in unusual combinations that defy classification. The Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon is partly Gnostic and partly Nestorian. Mormonism, in addition to its Arian, Monarchianist, and dualistic elements, also teaches that even God the Father was once not divine, and that we humans can ourselves aspire to the same kind of divinity “achieved” by God the Father and Jesus. There are no notable modern versions of the heresy “Jesus is not fully human.”

**Why Does a Correct Understanding
of Jesus Matter?**

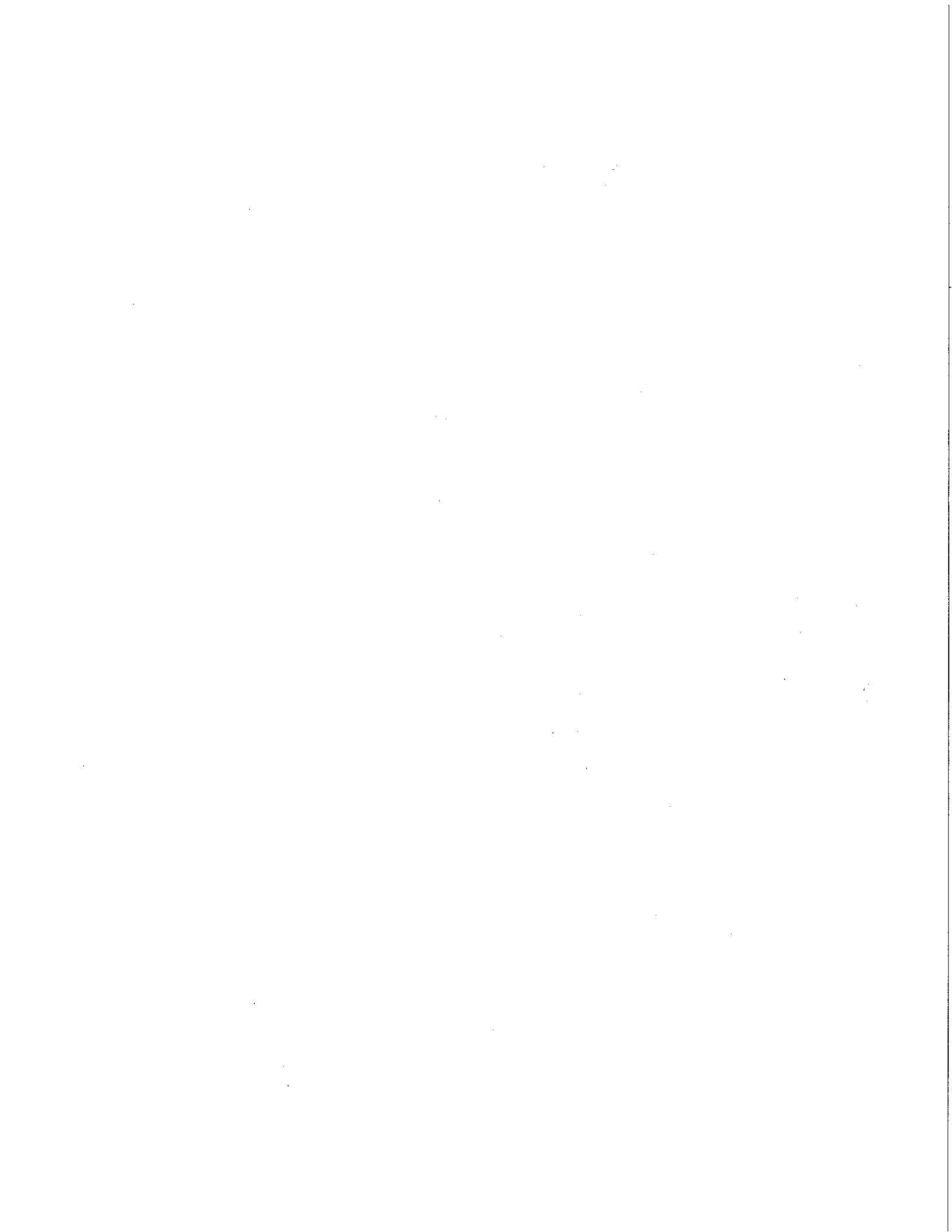
Denial of Jesus’ humanity makes it impossible for us to see him as our model of holiness. We do not see a man who, like us, struggled with temptation (see Lk 4:1-13), agonizingly fought to submit his will to that of his Father (see Lk 22:39-46), suffered grievously from the rejection, ridicule, and persecution that were part of his public life and his death, and whose physical suffering during his passion and death were equally grievous. If Jesus is not human, we also have no one who can understand, sympathize with, and console us when we are bereaved, suffer pain, or experience any kind of injustice from others.

On the other hand, *denial of Jesus’ divinity* undermines his entire life and message. He claimed to be God; if this is not true, he cannot be Truth itself, and nothing he teaches need be taken seriously. He is just one more “great moral teacher” — and, since he is a liar, not one to be relied upon. Furthermore, if Jesus is not divine, God did not really visit his people, and the entire understanding of why we need a divine, not merely human, Savior collapses. This in turn undermines the doctrine of original sin and even our very concept of the seriousness of sin.



Last, if Jesus is not divine, then there is no Trinity — no community of Persons who live eternally giving themselves to each Other. Nor, then, are our families modeled on Trinitarian life. Lacking this understanding of the way human love, marriage, sexuality, fatherhood, and motherhood are reflections of God’s own inner life, we find our basic social structures returning to a pagan anarchy that daily inflicts tremendous sorrow in our modern culture.

(CCC 422-424, 446-449, 461-476)



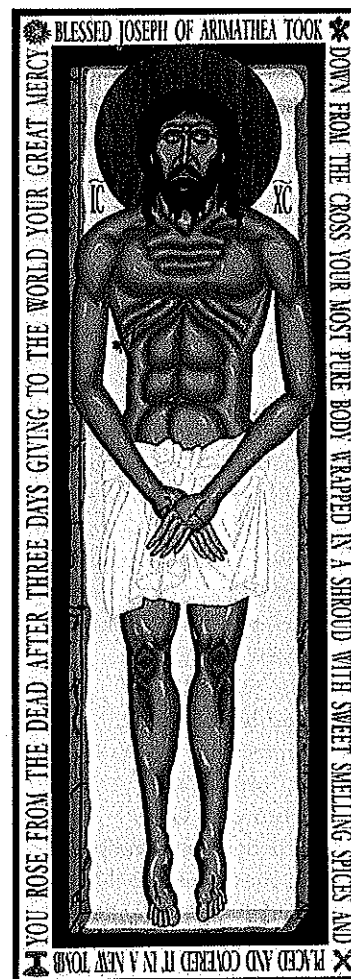
Jesus, the Unexpected Messiah

"And here he is, speaking openly, and they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Christ? Yet we know where this man comes from; and when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from." So Jesus proclaimed, as he taught in the temple, "You know me, and you know where I come from? But I have not come of my own accord; he who sent me is true, and him you do not know. I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me."... Yet many of the people believed in him; they said, "When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?" The Pharisees heard the crowd thus muttering about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest him. Jesus then said, "I shall be with you a little longer, and then I go to him who sent me; you will seek me and you will not find me; where I am you cannot come." The Jews said to one another, "Where does this man intend to go that we shall not find him? ... What does he mean by saying, 'You will seek me and you will not find me,' and, 'Where I am you cannot come?'" ... some of the people said, "This is really the prophet." Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the scripture said that the Christ is descended from David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" So there was a division among the people over him.... The officers then went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why did you not bring him?" The officers answered, "No man ever spoke like this man!" The Pharisees answered them, "Are you led astray, you also? Have any of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, who do not know the law, are accursed." Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee."

~ John 7:26-29, 31-36, 40-43, 45-52

WHEN JESUS WAS BORN in a stable in a Bethlehem too full of travelers to give his parents lodging, an angel announced his birth to shepherds in a nearby field: "I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:10-11). The

Savior, the Messiah, had entered the world. When Jesus was a mere forty-day-old infant, his parents took him to the Temple and offered him to his Father (see Lk 2:22). An old man, Simeon, whom the Holy Spirit had promised would see the Messiah before he died (see Lk 2:25-26), saw the little family. Taking Jesus in his arms, he prophesied that



*Icon of Christ in the Tomb,
by Fr. Antoninus Niemiec, OP*

the child was *“set for the fall and rising of many in Israel”* (Lk 2:34).

History records only one religious leader whose coming was plainly foretold (see Lk 24:27; Jn 5:39). For more than a thousand years, the Jews had awaited the coming of a Messiah. The word “Messiah” in Hebrew means “anointed one” (and the word “Christ” comes from a word meaning the same thing in Greek, the language of the New Testament). The idea of a Messiah came into humanity’s consciousness immediately following the fall of Adam and Eve into sin. This sin lost, for our first parents and all of us descended from them, friendship with God, the joys of the Garden of Eden, harmony of soul and body, an unclouded intellect and will, and unending life in harmony with the universe. This tragic loss for all of us was irrevocable — except that Adam and Eve had been made by a God of infinite love. Aware of their naked helplessness, in his almighty goodness he withheld his justified anger at their awful arrogance and, to heal their fatal wound, promised them a savior. He announced that, in time, he would send one who would be utterly at enmity with the serpent, the evil one (see Gn 3:15).

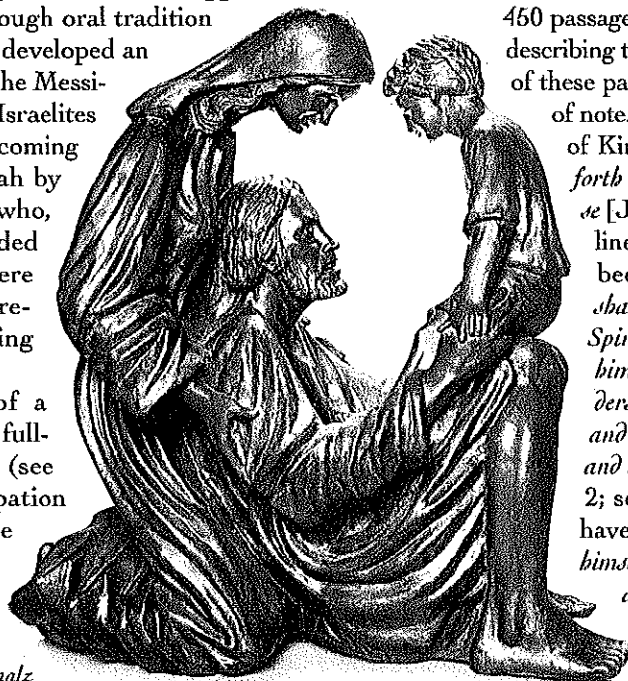
Over the millennia, while God shaped his people to envision, accept, obey, and love but one God

amid tribes surrounding them that worshipped idols, the Israelites through oral tradition and written testaments developed an understanding of what the Messiah would be like. The Israelites were kept aware of the coming of the promised Messiah by God-inspired prophets who, through the ages recorded in Sacred Scripture, were sent to the people to prepare them for his coming (see Is 6:8; Jer 1:7).

The expectation of a Messiah grew until the fullness of time had come (see Gal 4:4), when anticipation was at a peak. Even the Gentiles were aware of the coming of a special person. The

Love’s Bond, by Timothy Schmalz

“History records only one religious leader whose coming was plainly foretold.”



magi came from the east, led by a star to the land of Judea, to adore a king to whom they sought to pay homage (see Mt 2:2). Romans wrote that there was an acceptance of the Scriptural prophecies in the East (Seutonius) and even throughout the Roman Empire (Tacitus). Cicero wrote about the people’s need to recognize a King “to be saved” although he did not know whom the prophecies foretold; Virgil also spoke of the same tradition. Six centuries before Jesus was born, the Greek playwright Aeschylus wrote of God appearing to end “this curse” by accepting upon himself all our sins. The Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato both spoke of the “Logos” (the Word) who was yet to come; another of the Greek playwrights, of a savior and redeemer to release humanity from its “primal curse.” And while the Greeks and Romans expected a savior to come from the East (that is, Palestine), Chinese sages wrote of an expectation of a savior from the West (which Palestine is, in relation to China).

Then John the Baptist announced the electrifying news: the day of the Messiah was at hand (see Lk 3:15-17).

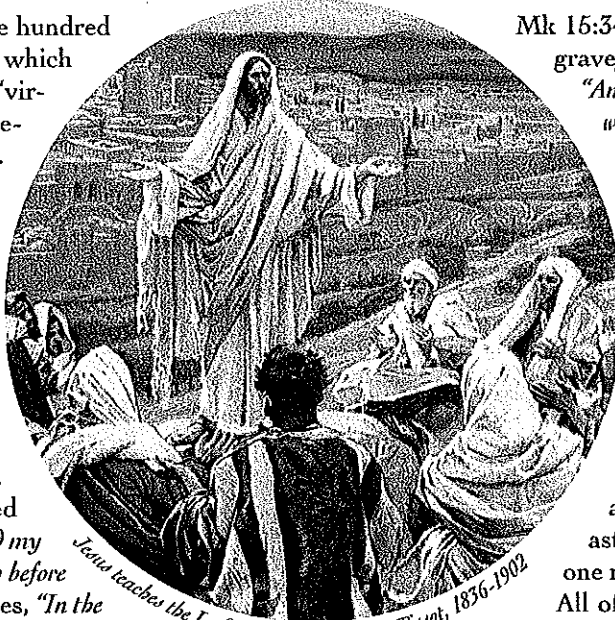
The many prophecies made to the Israelites not only foretold the coming of the Christ, the anointed one, but also gave striking details by which he could be identified.

It is estimated that the Old Testament contains over 450 passages that could be identified as describing the promised Messiah. Some of these passages are especially worthy of note. He would be a descendant of King David: *“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse [Jesse was David’s father; the line of David had, supposedly, been destroyed], and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord”* (Is 11:1-2; see Lk 1:31-33). He would have no human father: *“The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel”*

(Is 7:14; see Mt 2:20-23; Lk 1:26-33) (the prophecy of the virginity of Mary is most clearly seen in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures prepared at least one hundred years before Jesus' birth, which used the Greek word for "virgin" to translate the Hebrew "young woman"). His birthplace is named: "O Bethlehem . . . from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days" (Mi 5:2; see Mt 2:1; Lk 2:4-7), and it is this identification that led the magi to Jesus (see Mt 2:1-6). He would be announced by a herald: "Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me" (see Mal 3:1), who cries, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Is 40:3; see Mk 1:2).

His mission is described: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Is 61:1-2; see Lk 4:16-21). He will come as a triumphant king, as David did, into Jerusalem: "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass" (Zec 9:9; see Mk 11:1-11). He will suffer grievously: "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. . . he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed" (Is 53:3, 5; see Mt 26:57-68, 27:1-26). He will be scorned, nailed to a cross, and his very clothing will be divided among strangers: "All who see me mock at me, they make mouths at me, they wag their heads; He committed his cause to the Lord; let him deliver him, let him rescue him, for he delights in him!" (Ps 22:7-8; see Mt 27:39-44); "they have pierced my hands and feet" (Ps 22:16; see Jn 19:37; Jn 20:24-27); "they divide my garments among them, and for my raiment they

"Jesus was not the Messiah awaited by the nation's religious leaders or those with dreams of conquest or of throwing off the yoke of Rome."



Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer, by James Tissot, 1836-1902

cast lots" (Ps 22:18; see Jn 19:23-24). He will feel the desolation of the sins he has taken on himself: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Ps 22:1; see

Mk 15:34). He will be buried in a graveyard in a rich man's tomb: "And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death" (Is 53:9; see Mt 27:57-60). He is the savior of all mankind: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Is 49:6; see Acts 13:47). Each prophecy by itself, however striking, might fit more than one individual; but all together they are astonishingly fulfilled in only one man, Jesus of Nazareth.

All of these prophecies did not create in the minds of the waiting Israelites the same perception of the expected Messiah. The poor of Galilee and Judea, the ordinary people, looked for a Savior who would be the "consolation of Israel" (Lk 2:25; see also Lk 1:46-55). The accounts of the life of Jesus in the New Testament fit the expectations of the poor and ordinary People of Israel. Jesus healed all who were brought to him (see Mk 6:56). He said he was a physician to sinners, not the righteous (see Mk 2:17), and the "good shepherd" who cares for his flocks (see Mk 14:27; Jn 10:1-16). He said of himself that he "came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28). Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem was hailed by the ordinary folk, who waved palm branches and laid down their garments to honor the humble wonder-worker from Nazareth who came riding on an ass (see Jn 12:12-14). For them he was "he who is to come" (Lk 7:19).

The leaders of the nation were notably absent from this welcoming march; they had been in consultation among themselves as to how to trap, capture, and put Jesus to death (see Mk 3:6; Jn 11:45-53). Jesus was not the Messiah awaited by the nation's religious leaders or those with dreams of conquest or of throwing off the yoke of Rome. The Pharisees

and scribes — and even his disciples, at times — expected a religious leader who would teach only the Jewish law and customs and establish the supremacy of the tribes of Israel (see Acts 1:6). Those with political and military aspirations expected a powerful political leader who would organize the militant spirit of the populace into a mighty army as in the days of Saul and David, defeat the hated Romans, and restore the material might and grandeur of Israel (see Jn 6:15).

For them, he was truly *“a sign that is spoken against”* (Lk 2:34). His daily actions were flagrantly in opposition to their own teachings. He broke the sabbath prohibition against work by healing human ills (see Mt 12:10-13; Jn 5:2-9), befriended sinners and outcasts such as tax collectors (Lk 7:34) and ate with them (see Mt 9:10; Lk 19:1-7), preached by the side of the lake or in a field (see Mk 2:13; Lk 6:17) when the priestly class would teach only in a synagogue or the Temple. Jesus taught as one having authority, not as the scribes taught (see Mt 7:28-29). Even though he said that he had not come to abolish the law (see Mt 5:17), he preached the spirit of the law of Moses rather than the deadening traditions that had grown up around it (see Mk 7:5-12) and healed by forgiving sins (Mt 9:2-7). He said that God was his Father (see Mt 10:32-33), that he was in existence before Abraham and was himself God (see Jn 8:58), and that he was equal to the Father (see Jn 10:30). In the eyes of the Pharisees and leaders of the nation, he was not a Messiah but a blasphemer (see Mk 2:7; Jn 5:18; Jn 8:59; Jn 10:30-33). Had Jesus not truly been God, these were crimes of blasphemy punishable with death by stoning, according to the law of Moses (see Lv 24:16).

Jesus was truly an unexpected Messiah. He was seen as a prophet (see Mt 21:11; Mk 8:27-28), yet he was more than a prophet. He was God’s only Son, and that gift of God to us, no one could ever have expected. He came from the Father, and he

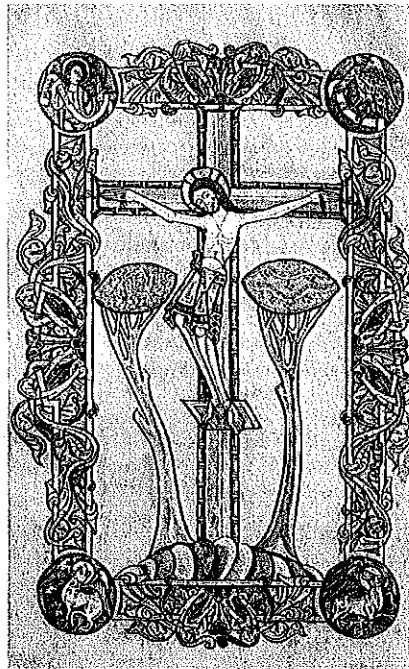
came to do the Father’s will (see Jn 6:38), which was to be the Savior of the world. He came not to be the chief Pharisee or the helmeted ruler of a Jewish kingdom. His Kingdom was not to be of this world (see Jn 18:36). The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke do, however, emphasize the mission of Jesus as preaching the Kingdom of God that he came to establish (see Mt 4:23; Mk 1:14-15; Lk 4:43). He came to bring a new spirit to the world, the love of the Holy Spirit. Although he healed bodies, he wanted most of all to change hearts. He came to *“cast fire upon the earth”* (Lk 12:49) to burn out the old ways of doing things, the old ways of thinking and behaving — to drive sin out of human hearts. He taught us to love God first and to love our neighbor (see Lk 10:25-37), to love even our enemies and to do good to those who hate and persecute us (see Mt 5:43-47), to sin no more (see Jn 5:14), to *“save the lost”* (Lk 19:10), for truly we are our brother’s keeper. In the Beatitudes (see Mt 5:3-10), he taught us to embrace a new Spirit and, in so doing,

to find true happiness here on earth and hereafter in Heaven. He endured suffering as we do, but made it holy and gave it redemptive meaning because he endured it out of love (see 1 Jn 4:10).

This Messiah was unexpected. He was man and he was God. He reigned in Heaven but came to bring Heaven to our earth. Astonishingly, he considered *us* worthy of *him*. In Jesus Christ, God kept his promise to save us. He sent as Messiah a Son — a gift beyond our expectation, wildest dreams, or comprehension: *“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him”* (1 Jn 4:9). And the Son, in imitation of his Father’s stupendous love, not only came among us as our Savior, but also arranged to remain with us always, *“to the close of the age”* (Mt 28:20). Our best response to this most unexpected Messiah is to be, like him, an instrument to continue the work of love that brought him among us.

(CCC 422, 436-445, 559-560, 574-576, 587-591, 702, 711-716)

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Crucifixion, 11th century illuminated manuscript from a Psalter