

The Incarnation



What is the Incarnation?

By the word 'Incarnation' we mean that God the Son took to himself a human nature for the sake of our salvation. The word 'Incarnation' expresses the fact that Jesus Christ is not merely a man, a perfect man or even a saint, but God himself become man to save us and bring us back to God.

How did Jesus Christ come to be born?

The Annunciation is the historical event when God the Father, through the angel Gabriel, asked the Virgin Mary to become the mother of his Son. Mary, who was and always remained a virgin, questioned how she could conceive a child. The angel answered that this child would

be conceived by a miracle: *“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 1:35

Mary gave her free consent to become the Mother of God, opening the way to our salvation: *And Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”* Luke 1:38

As prophesied, Jesus was born in King David’s city of Bethlehem, meaning ‘the house of bread’. We celebrate this birth each year at Christmas, meaning ‘the Mass of Christ’.

The time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger. Luke 2:4-7

What are the titles of Jesus Christ?

Jesus. This Hebrew name means ‘God saves’, expressing well the purpose of the Incarnation.

Christ. From the Greek christos, meaning ‘anointed one’, a title of a priest, prophet or king. This word was also used for the promised Messiah.

Lord. From the Greek kyrios, often used for addressing God in the Bible.

Son of God. A title of the Messiah that also indicates the divinity of Jesus Christ.

Son of Man. A title of the Messiah that also indicates the humanity of Jesus Christ.

Son of David. This identifies Jesus as the promised heir of King David who will reign over the Church, the new Israel, forever.

True God and True Man

The divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ were revealed throughout his life. Elizabeth hailed Mary as ‘mother of my Lord’ and wise men came to worship him at his birth. John’s Gospel states that the Word, who is God, ‘became flesh’.

The Incarnation in the Creed

The Nicene Creed (325 AD) is an ancient summary of Christian belief. It defines the two natures of Christ.

JESUS IS TRUE GOD

I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father. Through him all things were made.

He was, is and always will be God with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He is begotten not made, a divine person, not a created person like us. All created things came to be through him.

JESUS IS TRUE MAN

For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

He became man, body and soul, participating fully in human life, and remaining incarnate to unite humanity with God forever.

Mistakes about the Incarnation include: Docetism, which claims that Jesus only appears to be human; Arianism, which denies that Jesus is truly God; and Nestorianism, which claims that Jesus is two conjoined persons rather than one.

The Incarnation and the prayer Hail Mary

The Hail Mary is based on the Incarnation, combining the words of Gabriel and Elizabeth with the title 'Mother of God'.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Common Questions

Did the Church invent Jesus' divinity centuries after his death?

All the relevant historical documents show that belief in the divinity of Christ was central to the faith of the first Christians and not something invented by the Church centuries later.

First, much of the New Testament was written well before the end of the first century by the apostles or those closely associated with them. Since the New Testament affirms Jesus' divinity, as argued above, the first Christians to have known Jesus personally clearly believed in his divinity.

Second, other early documents confirm the consistency of early Christian belief in the divinity of Christ. For example, St. Ignatius wrote in AD 107, *"Our God, Jesus Christ, was conceived by Mary in accord with God's plan: of the seed of David, it is true, but also of the Holy Spirit."* Since, in this letter, St. Ignatius explicitly describes Jesus Christ as 'our God', it is clear that early Christians recognized Christ's divinity.

Finally, the pagan historian Pliny the Younger informed the Emperor Trajan at the beginning of the second century that Christians regularly met to worship Christ 'as a god'. Although Pliny did not fully understand Christianity, his letter confirms that the early Christians

worshipped Christ as divine, rather than honoring him merely as a great man or prophet.

Do some early texts about Christ, such as the ‘gnostic gospels’, deny his divinity?

Contrary to popular belief, the so-called ‘gnostic gospels’ do not deny the divinity of Christ. On the contrary, these false gospels tend to downplay the humanity of Christ.

In the so-called *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, for example, the child ‘Jesus’ is depicted as rather alien and malevolent, hurting and killing people by divine power when they disturb him.

Furthermore, even the earliest texts of these gnostic gospels come from the later second century, well after the completion of the books of the New Testament. The gnostic gospels are not, therefore, a reliable guide to the beliefs of the first Christians but belong, rather, to attempts in subsequent centuries to subvert early Christian belief.

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