



## The Mystery of the Incarnation in the Early Ecumenical Councils

As given in the

[Catechism of the Catholic Church \(vatican.va\)](http://vatican.va)

(For all references, please refer to the *Catechism* directly)

It is important to note the context of these paragraphs in the *Catechism*, as well as their content.

The *Catechism* is divided into four parts, each one is related to and arises out of the others:

- Part 1: The Profession of Faith (What We Believe)
- Part 2: The Celebration of the Christian Mystery (What We Celebrate)
- Part 3: Life in Christ (How We Live)
- Part 4: Christian Prayer (How We Pray)

The paragraphs which concern us come in **PART ONE**. This treats of the Faith we profess. Having affirmed our capacity to know about God by the use of reason alone, the *Catechism* then speaks of God's revelation of his inner life and of our response to that revelation:

- **PART ONE: THE PROFESSION OF FAITH**
  - SECTION ONE "I BELIEVE" - "WE BELIEVE"**
    - CHAPTER ONE: OUR CAPACITY FOR GOD
    - CHAPTER TWO: GOD'S INITIATIVE IN REVEALING HIMSELF TO US
    - CHAPTER THREE: OUR RESPONSE TO GOD

In **SECTION TWO** of this same part, the *Catechism* explains how the **CREEDS** we use in the Liturgy were formulated in the early Church. It first asks why the Word became flesh (Point I) and then what the Church understands by the Incarnation (Point II).

In Point III, it details the challenges posed by alternative theories concerning the mystery of the Person of Jesus of Nazareth (as it will concerning the mystery of the Person of the Holy Spirit):

- SECTION TWO I. THE CREEDS**
  - CHAPTER ONE I BELIEVE IN GOD THE FATHER
  - CHAPTER TWO I BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST, THE ONLY SON OF GOD
  - CHAPTER THREE I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

What follows is the whole text of **CHAPTER TWO**:

CHAPTER TWO I BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST, THE ONLY SON OF GOD

Article Three: "He was conceived by the Power of the Holy spirit, and was born of the Virgin Mary"

✦ **PARAGRAPH 1. THE SON OF GOD BECAME MAN**

**Point I. WHY DID THE WORD BECOME FLESH?**

456 With the **Nicene Creed**, we answer by confessing: "*For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit, he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.*"

457 The Word became flesh for us in order *to save us by reconciling us with God*, who "*loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins*": "*the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world*", and "*he was revealed to take away sins*":

Sick, our nature demanded to be healed; fallen, to be raised up; dead, to rise again. We had lost the possession of the good; it was necessary for it to be given back to us. Closed in the darkness, it was necessary to bring us the light; captives, we awaited a Saviour; prisoners, help; slaves, a liberator. Are these things minor or insignificant? Did they not move God to descend to human nature and visit it, since humanity was in so miserable and unhappy a state?

458 The Word became flesh so *that thus we might know God's love*: "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." "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

459 The Word became flesh *to be our model of holiness*: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me." "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." On the mountain of the Transfiguration, the Father commands: "Listen to him!" Jesus is the model for the Beatitudes and the norm of the new law: "Love one another as I have loved you." This love implies an effective offering of oneself, after his example.

460 The Word became flesh *to make us "partakers of the divine nature"*: "For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God." "For the Son of God became man so that we might become God." "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."

**Point II. THE INCARNATION**

461 Taking up St. John's expression, "*The Word became flesh*". The Church calls "Incarnation" the fact that the Son of God assumed a human nature in order to accomplish our salvation in it. In a hymn cited by St. Paul, the Church sings the mystery of the Incarnation:

*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, 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.*

462 The *Letter to the Hebrews* refers to the same mystery:

*Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, Lo, I have come to do your will, O God."*

463 Belief in the true Incarnation of the Son of God is the distinctive sign of Christian faith: "*By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God.*" Such is the joyful conviction of the Church from her beginning whenever she sings "*the mystery of our religion*": "He was manifested in the flesh."

### Point III. Jesus Christ: TRUE GOD AND TRUE MAN

464 The unique and altogether singular event of the **Incarnation of the Son of God does not mean that Jesus Christ is part God and part man**, nor does it imply that he is the result of a confused mixture of the divine and the human. He became truly man while remaining truly God. Jesus Christ is true God and true man. **During the first centuries, the Church had to defend and clarify this truth of faith against the heresies that falsified it.**

465 The **first heresies denied** not so much Christ's divinity as **his true humanity** (*Gnostic Docetism*). From apostolic times the Christian faith has insisted on the true incarnation of God's Son "*come in the flesh*". But already in the third century, the **Church in a council at Antioch** had to affirm against Paul of Samosata that Jesus Christ is Son of God by nature and not by adoption. **The first ecumenical council of Nicaea in 325** confessed in its Creed that the Son of God is "*begotten, not made, of the same substance (homo-ousios) as the Father*", and condemned **ARIUS**, who had affirmed that the Son of God "*came to be from things that were not*" and that he was "*from another substance*" than that of the Father.

466 The **NESTORIAN heresy** regarded Christ as a human person joined to the divine person of God's Son. Opposing this heresy, St. Cyril of Alexandria and the **third ecumenical council, at Ephesus in 431**, confessed "*that the Word, uniting to himself in his person the flesh animated by a rational soul, became man.*" Christ's humanity has no other subject than the divine person of the Son of God, who assumed it and made it his own, from his conception. For this reason **the Council of Ephesus proclaimed in 431 that Mary truly became the Mother of God** by the human conception of the Son of God in her womb: "*Mother of God, not that the nature of the Word or his divinity received the beginning of its existence from the holy Virgin, but that, since the holy body, animated by a rational soul, which the Word of God united to himself according to the hypostasis, was born from her, the Word is said to be born according to the flesh.*"

467 The **MONOPHYSITES** affirmed that the human nature had ceased to exist as such in Christ when the divine person of God's Son assumed it. Faced with this heresy, **the fourth ecumenical council, at Chalcedon in 451**, confessed:

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.

468 After the **Council of Chalcedon**, some made of Christ's human nature a kind of personal subject. Against them, the **fifth ecumenical council, at Constantinople in 553**, confessed that "there is but one hypostasis [or person], which is our Lord Jesus Christ, one of the Trinity." Thus 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.*"<sup>24</sup>

469 The Church thus confesses that Jesus is **inseparably true God and true man**. He is truly the Son of God who, without ceasing to be God and Lord, became a man and our brother:

"What he was, he remained and what he was not, he assumed", sings the Roman Liturgy. And the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom proclaims and sings: 'O only-begotten Son and Word of God, immortal being, you who deigned for our salvation to become incarnate of the holy Mother of God and ever-virgin Mary, you who without change became man and were crucified, O Christ our God, you who by your death have crushed death, you who are one of the Holy Trinity, glorified with the Father and the Holy Spirit, save us!"

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