

The Human Knowledge of Christ

ISSUE: What does the Church teach concerning Christ's human knowledge?

RESPONSE: The constant teaching of the Church is that Christ, in His human intellect, knew all things that a created intellect could know from the moment of His conception.

DISCUSSION: This issue points to the great mystery of the Incarnation when, in the "fullness of time," God took on human nature (Gal. 4:4-5; Jn. 1:14). In doing so, our God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, united Himself in some fashion with every human person. As we consider the mystery of Christ's being fully human and fully divine, we are filled with wonder and joy. For God is truly with us; He has visited His people (Is. 7:14; Mt. 1:23; Lk. 7:16), offering salvation to all the nations.

The Church affirms that human nature was "assumed" and not "absorbed" in the Incarnation. In His Person Christ is true God *and* true man, not some mixture of the human and divine (Catechism, no. 464). In trying to come to grips with this tremendous paradox, many great minds throughout history have fallen into error by embracing only part of this magnificent reality. Many people today, in rightly affirming Christ's humanity, have failed to leave room for the complementary truth that Christ is also fully divine. It is within this context that we examine Christ's human knowledge. It is legitimate to ask how God could at the same time be "one like us" (cf. Heb. 4:15) and yet know everything. However, the answer to this question must be faithful to the data of divine Revelation as consistently taught by the Church.

We must confess, as the Church has done consistently throughout her history, that Jesus Christ is fully human. This truth is summarized in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 470, which in turn quotes Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22:

The Son of God . . . worked with human hands; He thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart He loved. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like to us in all things except sin.

Yet, because He is also fully divine, Christ has both a divine and human intellect. His human intellect of itself is not unlimited, in that it does not have the full comprehension of His divinity; that is something only His divine intellect possesses. Yet the consensus of Fathers, Popes, and doctors of the Church is that His human intellect has *constant and habitual knowledge of all things that a created intellect can know*.

A survey of magisterial statements demonstrates this point. In the year 600, Pope St. Gregory I (the Great) affirmed that anyone who interprets Mk. 13:32 to mean that Christ did not know the day or the hour of Judgment would have to be a Nestorian, that is, one who erroneously holds that Christ is two distinct persons, one human and one divine, and that He didn't know the day or the hour as a *human* person. The Pope explained the correct meaning of this passage, teaching that Christ "in His human nature indeed did know the day and the hour of judgment, but nevertheless He did not know this from His human nature. . . . Therefore (as) God and man He knows the day and the hour of judgment; but on this account, because God is man" (Letter to Patriarch of Alexandria). In other words, Christ as man knew the day and the hour, but only because He is God, which informed His human nature, and not by virtue of His human nature alone.

In 1907, Pope St. Pius X rejected the Modernist proposition that there was a time when Christ did not know that He was the Messiah (*Lamentabili*). In 1918, the Holy Office condemned the propositions that Christ, while on earth, did not have the knowledge that the blessed enjoy in Heaven and that He was ignorant of some things proportionate to a created intellect. In 1943, Pope Pius XII affirmed that Christ "from the first moment of His Incarnation . . . through that beatific vision, which He began to enjoy when He had hardly been conceived in the womb of the Mother of God . . . has the members of His mystical body always and constantly present to Him, and He embraces all with His redeeming love" (*Mystici Corporis*).

In His humanity, the Lord grows, learns, has human emotions, prays, and suffers. Nonetheless, all these human attributes belong to the Divine Person whose humanity this is. Thus, in His humanity, in His human mind and human will, Jesus of Nazareth is aware of His own divine identity. As the Catechism puts it: “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” (no. 482). Indeed, “by its union to the divine wisdom in the person of the Word Incarnate, Christ enjoyed in His human knowledge the fullness of understanding of the eternal plans He had come to reveal. What He admitted to not knowing in this area, He elsewhere declared Himself not sent to reveal” (no. 474). This means that Jesus knew everything as God, but only disclosed that which He was sent to reveal by the Father.

Included in the human knowledge of the Incarnate God was the very purpose of His coming: to die for the sins of all (“His redemptive passion was the very reason for His Incarnation” [no. 606]). “Jesus’ violent death was not the result of chance in an unfortunate coincidence of circumstances, but is part of the mystery of God’s plan. . .” (no. 599). United with the Father, He gives Himself up to death for us, so that He “could say in our name from the cross: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (no. 603). We should note that the cry is said “in our name”; Jesus Himself never knows abandonment by the Father.

And what about Lk. 2:52, which plainly declares that Christ “grew in grace and wisdom”? According to St. Thomas Aquinas, a real progress was not possible for Christ in His beatific knowledge and His infused knowledge, as these contained from the very beginning all things that could be known by a created intellect. However, Christ as man did have experiential knowledge, but this knowledge would have been new not in content, *but only in the manner of acquisition*. The fact that Christ “grew in grace and wisdom” does not mean He gained new knowledge that He didn’t have before, but rather only that He gained in a new way knowledge that He already had (cf. *Summa Theologica*, III, 12, 2).

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Last edited: 7/97

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