

EPIPHANY

CATHOLIC

CHURCH

Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 21, 2021



FROM POPE FRANCIS

REFLECTIONS ON IRAQ TRIP



Recently, the Lord allowed me to visit Iraq, carrying out a project of Saint John Paul II. Never before has a Pope been in the land of Abraham. Providence willed that this should happen now, as a sign of hope, after years of war and terrorism, and during a severe pandemic.

After this Visit, my soul is filled with gratitude — gratitude to God and to all those who made it possible...

I deeply felt the penitential sense of this pilgrimage: I could not draw near to that tortured people, to that martyr-Church, without taking upon myself, in the name of the Catholic Church, the cross they have been carrying for years; an enormous cross, like the one placed at the entrance of Qaraqosh. I felt it particularly seeing the still-open wounds of the destruction, and even more so when meeting and hearing the testimony of those who survived the violence, persecution, exile....

The Iraqi people have the right to live in peace; they have the right to rediscover the dignity that belongs to them. Their religious and cultural roots go back thousands of years: Mesopotamia is the cradle of civilization. Historically, Baghdad is a city of primary importance, which for centuries housed the richest library in the world. And what destroyed it? War. War is always that monster that transforms itself with the change of epochs and continues to devour humanity. But the response to war is not another war; the response to weapons is not other weapons. And I asked myself: who was selling the weapons to the terrorists? Who sells weapons today to the terrorists, who are carrying out massacres in other areas, let us think of Africa, for example? It is a question that I would like someone to answer. The response is not war, but the response is fraternity. This is the challenge not only for Iraq: it is the challenge for many regions in conflict and, ultimately, it is the challenge for the entire world: fraternity.

For this reason, we met and we prayed, Christians and Muslims, along with representatives of other religions, in Ur, where Abraham received God's call some four thousand years ago. Abraham is our father in faith because he listened to the voice of God who promised him descendants; he left everything and departed. God is faithful to His promises and still today guides our steps toward peace; He guides the steps of

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those who journey on Earth with their gaze turned toward Heaven. And in Ur, standing together under those luminous heavens — the same heavens in which our father Abraham saw us, his descendants — that phrase seemed to resound once again in our hearts: You are all brothers and sisters.

A message of fraternity came from the ecclesial encounter in the Syro-Catholic Cathedral of Baghdad, where in 2010 forty-eight people were killed, including two priests, during the celebration of Mass. The Church in Iraq is a martyr Church. And in that temple — which bears, inscribed in the stone, the memory of those martyrs — the joy of the encounter resounded: my amazement at being in their midst mingled with their joy at having the Pope among them.

We launched a message of fraternity from Mosul and from Qaraqosh, along the Tigris River, near the ruins of ancient Nineveh. The ISIS occupation caused thousands and thousands of inhabitants to flee, including many Christians of different confessions and other persecuted minorities, especially the Yazidi. The ancient identity of these cities has been ruined. Now they are trying hard to rebuild; Muslims are inviting Christians to return, and together they are restoring churches and mosques. Fraternity is there. And, please, let us continue to pray for them, our sorely tried brothers and sisters, so they might have the strength to start over. And thinking of the many Iraqis who have emigrated, I would like to say to them: you have left everything, like Abraham; like him, safeguard faith and hope, and be weavers of friendship and of fraternity wherever you are. And, if you can, return.

A message of fraternity came from the two Eucharistic Celebrations: the one in Baghdad, in the Chaldean Rite, and the one in Erbil, the city in which I was welcomed by the President of the region and its Prime Minister, by the Authorities — whom I thank so much for having come to welcome me — and I was also welcomed by the people. Abraham's hope, and that of his descendants, were realized in the mystery we celebrated, in Jesus, the Son that God the Father did not spare, but gave for everyone's salvation: through His death and resurrection, He opened the way to the promised land, to that new life where tears are dried, wounds healed, brothers and sisters reconciled.

Let us praise God for this historic Visit and let us continue to pray for that Land and for the Middle East. In Iraq, despite the roar of destruction and weapons, the palm trees, a symbol of the country and of its hope, have continued to grow and bear fruit. So it is for fraternity: like the fruit of the palm trees, it does not make noise, but is fruitful and grows. May God, who is peace, grant a future of fraternity to Iraq, to the Middle East and to the entire world! —Francis

FROM THE PASTOR

YEAR OF THE FAMILY & CONTROVERSY



Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On the Feast of Saint Joseph Friday we began a year of the Family, instituted by Pope Francis. The family, in our Christian vision, is an indissoluble union of a man and a woman open in itself to the transmission of life. That appears simple enough but it is a definition rejected by most people in America today, including a majority of American Catholics (cf. pewforum.org).

The Church's launch of a year of the Family comes four days after the Vatican published a clarification on the possibility of blessing of unions of persons of the same sex. I have two motives in publishing the document in full (see page 5).

First, because of the massive confusion about the nature of marriage, this intervention by the Vatican clarifies pastoral ministry in this particular area and therefore provides guidance to this and every parish's discipleship and evangelization efforts in our multi-cultural milieu. It is my responsibility and that of my pastoral team and Catholic School staff to think with and minister with the Catholic Church, for we minister in her name.

"The family is an indissoluble union of a man and a woman open in itself to the transmission of life. This definition is rejected by most people in America today, including a majority of American Catholics."

Second, like most folks I am typically risk and confrontation averse, but with the ever broadening redefinition of marriage in our culture, it is our collective responsibility (yours and mine as disciples) to offer clarity to each other and to seekers, *and* compassionate dialogue with people of good will who disagree with

us but with whom we must collaborate for the common good of our nation and communities.

We minister, teach and engage the world from the perspective of our Faith. I realize that this can involve pain, misunderstanding and hostility, particularly when we are personally vested through family or friendships, but we need to persevere. Controversy over a tenet of the Catholic faith is not a can that can be kicked down the road. A false peace merely wallpapers over divisions—some very, very deep. —Fr. Eric

CELEBRATING OUR FAITH

SACRAMENTS SCHEDULE

Mass Times

Incense is used at 10:30am Sunday Mass. All Ministers have Gluten-free Hosts. 7:30 am Sunday Masses are Broadcast on Facebook at Epiphanyparish.com Drive Up Communion is available Sundays till 8:30am (Canopy).

Note: 8:15am School Masses are currently closed to the public due to the Pandemic.

Sunday, March 21, Fifth Sunday of Lent

4:00pm	Laurie Swartz
7:30am	Sally Leahy
10:30am	Clara and Issa Benyamin

Monday, March 22, Lenten Weekday

7:00am	Rose Wolters
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Tuesday, March 23, Lenten Weekday

7:00am	Charles and Steven Penn
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Wednesday, March 24, Lenten Weekday

7:00am	Albert, Roma and Robert Humenick
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Thursday, March 25, ANNUNCIATION OF THE LORD

7:00am	Tom Van Deven
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Friday, March 26, Lenten Weekday

7:00am	Robert and Charlotte Miller
5:30pm	Dave Tellman

Sunday, March 28, PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD

4:00pm	Helen Larkin
7:30am	Kenny and Roni Flener
10:30am	Mary Lou Guernsey

Confession Times

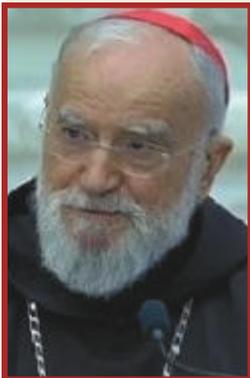
5:00pm Friday and 3:00pm Saturday in the Parish Hall. Please enter from the Corridor and depart out the South Door onto the Parking Lot.

Adoration Chapel News

Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament has returned to the Chapel: Monday to Friday: 7:30am to 6pm.

CARD. CANTALAMESSA

REAWAKENING DOGMA



Let us briefly call to mind the subject and spirit of the present Lenten meditations. Our purpose has been to react to the very widespread tendency to talk about the Church 'etsi Christus non daretur,' as if Christ did not exist, as if everything could be understood irrespective of him. Yet we have been meaning to react to that in an unusual way: not by trying to convince the world and the media of their mistake but by renewing and intensifying our faith in Christ. Not by way of apologetics, but of spirituality.

To talk about Christ, we have chosen the safest way, the dogmatic one: Christ true man, Christ true God, Christ one person. The way of the dogma is not old and outmoded. As Kierkegaard, one of the main existential thinkers, put it: 'The dogmatic terminology of the early Church is like a fairy castle, where the most handsome princes and the most beautiful princesses rest. You only have to wake them up, for them to jump up in all their glory.'

Well, that is the key: reawakening dogmas, infusing life into them again, just as when the Spirit entered Ezekiel's dried bones and they 'came to life and stood on their feet' (Ez 37:10). Last time we tried to do that in relation to the dogma of Christ 'true man'; today we want to do the same with the dogma of Christ 'true God.'

The dogma of Christ 'true God'

In 111 or 112 A.D., Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia and Pontus, wrote a letter to the emperor Trajan, asking him for advice on how to behave in the trials staged against Christians. He writes to the emperor, 'on the basis of the information gathered, all they were blamed for and all they did wrong was meeting on a set day before dawn to sing by alternate choirs a hymn to Christ as a God': *carmen Christo quasi Deo dicere*.

We are in Asia Minor, a few years after the death of the last apostle, John, and Christians already proclaim the divinity of Christ in songs! The faith in the divinity of Christ is born with the birth of the Church.

Yet, what remains of that faith? First of all, let us summarize the main aspects of the history of the dogma of the divinity of Christ. The latter was solemnly established by the Council of Nicaea in 325 with the words we repeat in the Creed: 'We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ... true God from true God, begotten not made of one substance with the Father.' Apart from its wording, the deeper meaning of the Nicenean definition, as can be gathered from Saint Athanasius, who was its most au-

thoritative witness and interpreter, was that in every language and every age Christ is to be recognized as God in the highest and firmest sense that the word God has in that language and culture, and not in any derivative or secondary sense.

It took a century for that truth in its radical sense to settle and to be accepted by the whole of Christianity. Once the latest revival of Arianism due to the inflow of the barbarians evangelized by heretics (Goths, Visigoths and Lombards) had been overcome, the dogma became a recognized asset of the whole of Christianity, both Eastern and Western.

The Reformation left it intact and in fact enhanced its central role; yet it introduced a new element that would later pave the way for negative developments. To react to formalism and nominalism which reduced dogmas to mere virtuoso exercises in speculation, Protestant reformers claim that: 'Knowing Christ amounts to a recognition of his benefits, not to an investigation of his natures and of the ways of his incarnation. Christ 'for me' becomes more important than Christ 'in himself.' Objective and dogmatic is opposed to subjective and intimate knowledge; the 'inner witness' given to Jesus by the Holy Spirit in the heart of each believer takes priority over the outer witness about Jesus given by the Church and in some cases even by Scriptures themselves.

In that interpretation the Enlightenment and Rationalism found suitable ground to demolish the dogma. For Kant, what matters is the moral ideal proposed by Christ, more than his own person. Nineteenth-century liberal theology practically reduces Christianity to the

sole ethical dimension and into the experience of God's paternity. The Gospel is stripped of every supernatural element: miracles, visions, the resurrection of Christ. Christianity only turns into a sublime moral ideal that can do without the divinity of Christ and even his historical existence. Gandhi who, unfortunately, had known Christianity in this reductive version, wrote: 'I would not even care if someone were to prove that the man Jesus actually never existed and that what is read in the Gospel is the fruit of the author's imagination. Because the Sermon on the Mount would remain true to my eyes.'

The reductionist version of Christianity closes-

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Responsum of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a *dubium* regarding the blessing of the unions of persons of the same sex, March 15, 2021

In some ecclesial contexts, plans and proposals for blessings of unions of persons of the same sex are being advanced. Such projects are not infrequently motivated by a sincere desire to welcome and accompany homosexual persons, to whom are proposed paths of growth in faith, “so that those who manifest a homosexual orientation can receive the assistance they need to understand and fully carry out God’s will in their lives”[1].

On such paths, listening to the word of God, prayer, participation in ecclesial liturgical actions and the exercise of charity can play an important role in sustaining the commitment to read one’s own history and to adhere with freedom and responsibility to one’s baptismal call, because “God loves every person and the Church does the same”[2], rejecting all unjust discrimination.

Among the liturgical actions of the Church, the sacramentals have a singular importance: “These are sacred signs that resemble the sacraments: they signify effects, particularly of a spiritual kind, which are obtained through the Church’s intercession. By them men are disposed to receive the chief effect of the sacraments, and various occasions of life are sanctified”[3]. The Catechism of the Catholic Church specifies, then, that “sacramentals do not confer the grace of the Holy Spirit in the way that the sacraments do, but by the Church’s prayer, they prepare us to receive grace and dispose us to cooperate with it” (#1670).

Blessings belong to the category of the sacramentals, whereby the Church “calls us to praise God, encourages us to implore his protection, and exhorts us to seek his mercy by our holiness of life”[4]. In addition, they “have been established as a kind of imitation of the sacraments, blessings are signs above all of spiritual effects that are achieved through the Church’s intercession”[5].

Consequently, in order to conform with the nature of sacramentals, when a blessing is invoked on particular human relationships, in addition to the right intention of those who participate, it is necessary that what is blessed be objectively and positively ordered to receive and express grace, according to the designs of God inscribed in creation, and fully revealed by Christ the Lord. Therefore, only those realities which are in themselves ordered to serve those ends are congruent with the essence of the blessing imparted by the Church.

For this reason, it is not licit to impart a blessing on relationships, or partnerships, even stable, that involve sexual activity outside of marriage (i.e., outside the indissoluble union of a man and a woman open in itself to the transmission of life), as is the case of the unions between persons of the same sex[6]. The presence in such relationships of positive elements, which are in themselves to be valued and appreciated, cannot justify these relationships and render them legitimate objects of an ecclesial blessing, since the positive elements exist within the context of a union not ordered to the Creator’s plan.

Furthermore, since blessings on persons are in relationship

with the sacraments, the blessing of homosexual unions cannot be considered licit. This is because they would constitute a certain imitation or analogue of the nuptial blessing[7] invoked on the man and woman united in the sacrament of Matrimony, while in fact “there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family”[8].

The declaration of the unlawfulness of blessings of unions between persons of the same sex is not therefore, and is not intended to be, a form of unjust discrimination, but rather a reminder of the truth of the liturgical rite and of the very nature of the sacramentals, as the Church understands them.

The Christian community and its Pastors are called to welcome with respect and sensitivity persons with homosexual inclinations, and will know how to find the most appropriate ways, consistent with Church teaching, to proclaim to them the Gospel in its fullness. At the same time, they should recognize the genuine nearness of the Church – which prays for them, accompanies them and shares their journey of Christian faith[9] – and receive the teachings with sincere openness.

The answer to the proposed *dubium* does not preclude the blessings given to individual persons with homosexual inclinations[10], who manifest the will to live in fidelity to the revealed plans of God as proposed by Church teaching. Rather, it declares illicit any form of blessing that tends to acknowledge their unions as such. In this case, in fact, the blessing would manifest not the intention to entrust such individual persons to the protection and help of God, in the sense mentioned above, but to approve and encourage a choice and a way of life that cannot be recognized as objectively ordered to the revealed plans of God[11].

At the same time, the Church recalls that God Himself never ceases to bless each of His pilgrim children in this world, because for Him “we are more important to God than all of the sins that we can commit”[12]. But he does not and cannot bless sin: he blesses sinful man, so that he may recognize that he is part of his plan of love and allow himself to be changed by him. He in fact “takes us as we are, but never leaves us as we are”[13].

For the above mentioned reasons, the Church does not have, and cannot have, the power to bless unions of persons of the same sex in the sense intended above.

The Sovereign Pontiff Francis, at the Audience granted to the undersigned Secretary of this Congregation, was informed and gave his assent to the publication of the above-mentioned *Responsum ad dubium*, with [this] Explanatory Note.

Rome, from the Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the 22nd of February 2021, Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter, Apostle.

Luis F. Card. Ladaria, S.I. Prefect

[1] FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris*

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FROM THE PRINCIPAL

2021-2022 REGISTRATION



Dear friends,

As the school year progresses toward Spring Break, we are beginning to shift our thoughts more and more to the 2020-21 academic school year. We are in the midst of completing our registration process, and I am glad to report that everything is progressing extremely well. Almost 95% of our present students have already registered, and we anticipate that a majority of those who

have not yet registered will do so in the next couple of weeks. 27 of the 30 students who came to us this fall have enrolled for next year. Also, close to 20 students who left Epiphany last August have registered to return for classes. We do have a few spaces in our Kindergarten open; if you know of anyone who is remotely considering Epiphany Catholic School as their educational choice for Kindergarten or any other grade, please contact me and we will attempt to initiate conversation on why we believe that our school is their best choice.

We will also be releasing the 2021-22 school calendar to the community in late April or early May, which will allow you to coordinate your plans for the upcoming year. Upcoming bulletin messages will discuss specific items in the calendar, as we attempt to make the best use of the time for learning and the professional development of our staff.

We are anticipating several major projects, as we look at the summer maintenance schedule. First, and most importantly, work will begin soon to deal with the problems with the east facade and interior of the junior high school, which is responsible for the periodic water problems experienced in the rooms. We are meeting with the Facilities Committee to look at other possible projects to consider for completion this summer as well. We will share more with our school community and parish once priorities have been set.

Reminder for those who shop at Kroeger's: Please make sure that you have signed up for the Kroeger Community Rewards Program. A portion of what you spend can go in the form of a rebate back to Epiphany Catholic School. Please check out the program to learn how you can select our school as a beneficiary at www.kroeger.com/topic/community-rewards.

We continue to strive to make Epiphany Catholic School a source of pride for our parish community. Please keep us in your prayers.

Mike Lootens

GO KNIGHTS!!!

PARISH UPDATES

CATCH UP HERE

Epiphany Youth Ministry

High School Youth Group meets on Sundays from 6:30-8 pm in the Parish Hall. This Sunday (3/21) there is NO HS Youth Group - Happy Spring Break! Join us next Sunday for a 'just-for-fun' night with food, music, dancing, and fun.

Junior High Youth Group (grades 6-8) meets once a month to play games, share faith, and grow together in our journey towards Christ. The next Junior High Youth Group is Friday, April 23rd from 7-8:30 pm.

To receive Youth Ministry updates, join our Flocknote group or email kara.esker@epiphanyparish.com to be added to the email list!

Sacraments this Spring

CCD and School students have been preparing to receive their Sacraments of Initiation. Please remember our students receiving First Reconciliation, Holy Communion, and Confirmation in your prayers.

First Reconciliation: Various dates have been scheduled in the month of April. **First Communion:** Sun. April 25th @ 2 pm (LIMITED ATTENDANCE: Mass closed to the public) **Confirmation:** Sat. May 8th @ 7 pm (LIMITED ATTENDANCE: Mass closed to the public) **Homeschoolers:** Those preparing to receive these sacraments and wish to participate in the mass, please contact Kara Esker, CCD Coordinator (kara.esker@epiphanyparish.com)

Discerning Priesthood or Consecrated Life?

"I am the resurrection and the life...whoever believes in Me will have eternal life." The gift of a vocation to the priesthood or consecrated life is discerned through prayer and grace. Call Fr. Chase Hilgenbrinck at (309) 671-1550, or email: fr_hilgenbrinck@cdop.org. For all those being called to the priesthood, diaconate and consecrated life, that they may deepen their faith in Christ who calls them to glorify God in a profoundly personal way through their vocations, we pray to the Lord.

Parish Outreach

(St. Vincent de Paul) Orlando Lopez email is outreach@epiphanyparish.com If you find yourself in serious economic need due to the pandemic, St. Vincent de Paul and Epiphany Parish want to help. Email Orlando Lopez at Parish Outreach.

Retrouvaille for Marriage Help

Marriage Help – Retrouvaille (pronounced retro-vi) has helped tens of thousands of couples at all stages of disillusionment or

misery in their marriage. This program can help you too. For confidential information about or to register for our next program beginning with a weekend on April 16-18, 2021 call 815-351-6968 or email: RetrouvailleJoliet@gmail.com or you can visit our web site at www.HelpOurMarriage.com

The Outdoor Stations of the Cross

An outside version of stations will be held immediately after Mass on Friday, March 26th, weather permitting. We will assemble outside the front of the church shortly after the completion of Friday night mass. Please see the Parish web site for details.

Free Throw Championship

We Epiphany's Knights of Columbus congratulates the following students for winning their respective age groups in the Knights of Columbus Council and District Free Throw Competition: 9 Years Old: Asher C. and Maia E., 10 Years Old: Evan E. and Ellie Y., 11 Years Old: Lucas B. and Malynn K., 12 Years Old: Ben M. and Kate S., 13 Years Old: A. J. H and Summer C., 14 Years Old: Luke S. All winners were presented with certificates signed by the Hon. Grand Knight John Niebur and gift cards. Epiphany Council 6498 thanks Brother Knight John Smyth for his execution of the contest!

Virtual Fun-Run Fundraiser

See epiphanyschools.org for more information. Participants in this Run/Walk will receive a special edition Epiphany Knights race shirt, finishers medal, and souvenir bib. Due to the challenges with the pandemic, we are limited to these fund-raising opportunities to benefit our school. We appreciate your willingness to give back!

laetitia, 250.

[2] SYNOD OF BISHOPS, Final Document of the XV Ordinary General Assembly, 150.

[3] SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium, 60.

[4] RITUALE ROMANUM (Roman Missal, General Instructions), n.9.

[5] Ibidem, n. 10.

[6] Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2357.

[7] In fact, the nuptial blessing refers back to the creation account, in which God's blessing on man and woman is related to their fruitful union (cf. Gen 1:28) and their complementarity (cf. Gen 2:18-24).

[8] FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation Amoris laetitia, 251.

[9] Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Letter *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, 15.

[10] De benedictionibus in fact presents an extended list of situations for which to invoke the blessing of the Lord.

[11] CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, 7.

[12] FRANCIS, General Audience of December 2, 2020, Catechesis on Prayer, the blessing.

[13] Ibidem.

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Cover Painting: Raising of Lazarus, Rembrandt, about 1630. The painting shows the moment Lazarus arises from death and his tomb as Christ calls him. Lazarus is in the darker half of the painting while the figures at left are far more illuminated than he. The painting is also a parable of spiritual life, the miracle of the hardened sinner receiving first grace.

SHARING IN THE WORK OF GOD

Thank you for your generosity in support of our mission.

Gifts from Our Parish Family

March 14, 2021	\$8,590
E-giving.....	\$10,760
Special.....	\$878
Parish Endowment.....	\$155
School Endowment.....	\$302
Capital Improvement.....	\$421

Weekly Budget	\$24,500
YTD Budget (37 weeks)	\$906,500
YTD Income.....	\$896,008
YTD Balance.....	(\$10,492)

est to us is the one made popular by Bultmann, this time in the name of de-mythologization. As he wrote: 'The formula 'Christ is' is false in every sense, when 'God' is considered as a being that may be objectivized, whether you interpret that formula according to Arius or Nicaea, in an orthodox or a liberal sense. It is correct if 'God' is meant as the event of divine actualization.' In less veiled words: Christ is not God, but in Christ there is (or is at work) God. We are extremely far from the dogma defined at Nicaea. Allegedly one would like to interpret the dogma with modern categories that way, but in fact this is nothing but a way of repositing, sometimes in the same terms, archaic solutions (those of Paul of Samosata, Marcellus of Ancyra, Photinus), which have already been evaluated and rejected by the conscience of the Church.

If one shifts from what theologians say to what, according to different surveys, ordinary people think of the divinity of Christ, he is left speechless. In the aftermath of a local council dominated by the opponents of Nicaea (Rimini, year 359 A.D.), Saint Jerome wrote that the whole world 'whimpered and was stunned they were Arian again.' We would have many more reasons than he had to whimper and to make his stunned exclamation our own.

Christ "true God" in the Gospels

Now, though, we need to stick to our purpose. Let us leave aside what the world thinks and try and reawaken in ourselves the faith in the divinity of Christ. A faith full of light, not a blurred one, a faith that may be objective and subjective at the same time, that is not only based on belief, but also lived out in practice. Even nowadays Jesus is not interested so much in what 'people' say about him, as in what his disciples say about him. The constantly pending question is: 'But who do you say that I am?' (Mt 16:15). This is the question we try and answer in the present meditation.

Let us start with the Gospels. In the synoptics the divinity of Christ is never openly stated, but it is continuously understood. Let us call to mind some of Jesus' sayings: 'the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' (Mt 9,6); 'No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son.' (Mt 11:27); 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away' (this saying is the same in all three synoptic Gospels) ; 'The Son of Man is the lord of the Sabbath' (Mk 2:28); 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.' (Mt 25:31-32). Who, except for God, can claim to be able to forgive sins in his own name and to proclaim himself as the ultimate judge of humanity and of history?

Just as a sample of hair or saliva is enough to reconstruct a person's DNA, so too only one line of the Gospel, if it is read without biases, is enough to reconstruct the DNA of Jesus, to discover what he thought of himself, but he could not openly say to

prevent misunderstandings. Every page of the Gospel literally exudes the divine transcendence of Christ.

But it is John who turned the divinity of Christ into the primary aim of his Gospel, its all-encompassing theme. He ends his Gospel by stating: 'But these are written that you may [come to] believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name' (Jn 20:31), and ends his First Letter almost with the same words: 'I write these things to you so that you may know that you have eternal life, you who believe in the name of the Son of God.' (I Jn 5:13).

One day, many years ago, I was celebrating Mass in a cloistered convent. The Gospel passage of the liturgy was John's page in which Jesus repeatedly uttered his words 'I am': "For if you do not believe that I AM, you will die in your sins... When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM' ... before Abraham came to be, I AM." (Jn 8:24,28,58). The fact that the two words 'I AM,' against any grammar rule, were written in capitals in the lectionary, certainly in combination with some other mysterious cause, ignited a spark. That word 'exploded' inside me.

I knew, from my studies, that John's gospel contained quite a few 'I Am', ego eimi, uttered by Jesus. I knew it was an important element for his Christology; that through them Jesus assigns to himself the name that in Isaiah God reserves for himself: 'To know and believe in me and understand that I am he' (Is 43:10). Yet my knowledge was bookish and motionless and did not arouse any special emotions. That day it was something quite different. We were in Eastertide and it sounded as if the Risen One himself proclaimed his own name before the heavens and the earth. His 'I Am' enlightened and filled the universe. I felt so small, like a spectator who is witnessing by chance and in silence a sudden and extraordinary scene, or a great natural wonder. It was a simple emotion of faith and nothing more, but one of those which, once gone, leave an indelible mark.

The Spirit of Jesus enabled John to accomplish an astonishing feat. He embraced the themes, symbols, expectations, in sum, all that was religiously alive, both in the Jewish and in the Hellenistic world, so that all this may serve one idea, better one person: Jesus Christ the Son of God and the Savior of the world. He learnt the language of his contemporaries, to be able to shout in that language, with all his strength, the only saving truth, the Word par excellence, 'the Word Incarnate.'

Only a revealed certainty, which is backed and sustained by God and his Spirit, could possibly unfold in a book with such insistence and consistency, starting from thousands of different points and always getting to one and the same conclusion: that is to the full identity of nature between the Father and the Son: 'The Father and I are one' (Jn 10:30). 'One,' in the Latin neutral form unum, mind you, that is one thing one nature, not one person (masculine unus)!

"One believes with the heart"

Just as we did for the humanity of Christ, so too we can now show how the ancient dogma regarding his divinity, while retaining its objective and ontological dimension, is able to encompass and enhance the value of the modern subjective and functional view. Doing the opposite, on the other hand, had proven quite difficult. To the dialectical logic of “either-or”, let us oppose the Catholic one of “et-et”.

None of the so-called ‘Christologies from below’, such as those, to be clear, taking Jesus as an ‘eschatological prophet and the highest revealer of the Father’ as their starting point, or Jesus as ‘a man in whom the awareness of God has reached its highest level’ (F. Schleiermacher), or Christ as ‘a human person in which divine nature subsists’ (not a divine person subsisting in human nature!): none of these Christologies, I repeat, has managed to reach the goal of embracing the true mystery of Christian faith and to safeguard the full divinity of Christ. The reason for that failure is explained by Jesus and was well grasped by John reporting it: ‘No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man’ (Jn 3:13). It is indeed possible for God, if he so wishes, to become man but not for man to turn into God!

On such premises we can restore and heighten the whole subjective and personalistic dimension of the dogma: the Christ ‘to me’ which was given preeminence by the Reformers, the Christ known from his benefits and the inner witness of the Spirit. This is the best fruit of ecumenism, that is of ‘reconciled differences,’ not opposed differences, as our Holy Father says. It is not a concession ‘pro bono pacis,’ but a mutual need and enrichment. We all need to give our faith that personal, intimate dimension, so that it may not be a dead repetition of ancient or modern formulas. On this point we are all called on to act: Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants alike.

Saint Paul says: ‘For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.’ (Rm 10:10). ‘Faith arises from the roots of the heart,’ in Augustine’s comment. In the Catholic view, just as in the Orthodox one, as well as later from a Protestant perspective, the profession of the right faith, orthodoxy, that is the second phase of the process, has often become so important as to overshadow that first phase taking place in the hidden depths of the heart. All the treatises on faith, *De fide*, written after Nicaea, deal with the orthodoxy of faith; nowadays one would say with the *fides quae*, not with the *fides qua*, with the things to believe and not with the personal act of believing.

This very first act of faith, precisely because it takes place in the heart, is a ‘singular’ act, which cannot be performed but by the individual, in absolute solitude with God. In John’s Gospel we hear Jesus repeatedly asking the same question: ‘Do you believe?’ (Jn 9:35; Jn 11:26); and every time this question elicits from the heart the cry of faith: ‘Yes, Lord, I believe!’

We also need to accept to experience that moment, to undergo that examination. If one immediately answers Jesus’ question ‘Do you believe?’, without thinking: ‘I certainly believe’ and

even finds it strange that a believer, a priest or a bishop, should be asked that question, it probably means that they still haven’t discovered what believing really means, that they have never experienced the great vertigo of reason preceding faith. The divinity of Christ is the highest peak, the ‘Everest,’ of faith. Believing in a God who was born in a stable and died on a cross! This is much more demanding than believing in a distant God who can be imagined by anyone as they like.

It is necessary to start by demolishing in us believers, and in us as men of the Church, the false persuasion that we are fine in terms of faith, and that perhaps we still need to work on love. It may be good after all, at least for some time, not to want to prove anything to anyone, but to deepen the inner appreciation of faith, to rediscover its roots in the heart!

We need to recreate the conditions to restore the faith in the divinity of Christ, to replicate the outburst of faith which gave rise to the dogma of Nicaea. The body of the Church once produced a supreme effort, in which, in faith, it rose above every human system and every resistance of reason. The tide of faith once rose to the highest level and its mark was left on the rock. Yet it is necessary for the tide to rise again, since the sign is not enough. It is not enough to repeat the Creed of Nicaea; it is necessary to renew the outburst of faith in the divinity of Christ that we had then, and which has remained unequalled through the ages. The custom of the Church (and not only of the Catholic Church!) provides for a profession of faith by the candidate, before receiving a mandate for teaching theology. That profession of faith often entailed reciting the creed as well as having to teach certain precise things – and avoiding to teach other equally precise things – that at that time in history were particularly sensitive issues. Think of the oath against modernism!

I believe that one thing above all should be ascertained: whoever teaches theology to the future ministers of the Gospel must firmly believe in the divinity of Christ. This should be ascertained through frank and fraternal discernment, rather than through an oath. After the Second Vatican Council (certainly not because of the Council!) there was a whole generation of priests leaving the seminary and getting to be ordained with very confused and blurred ideas on that Jesus whom they had to proclaim to people and to make present on the altar at Mass. I am convinced that many a crisis in priestly life started and still starts there.

Ecumenism and evangelization

What we have highlighted so far also has important consequences for Christian ecumenism. Two kinds of ecumenism are possible: the ecumenism of faith and that of incredulity; one that unites all those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that God is Father Son and Holy Spirit, and one that unites all those that are content with ‘interpreting’ these things each in their own way and according to their own philosophical system. It is a kind of ecumenism in which, at most, all believe in the same things because no one really believes in anything, in the deep sense of the

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word 'belief.'

The fundamental distinction of the spirits, in the realm of faith, is not between Catholics, Orthodox Christians and Protestants, but between those who believe in Christ Son of God and those who do not believe in him; in Saint Paul's terms, 'all those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours' (1 Cor 1:2) from those who do not call upon that name.

A new and invisible unity is under construction, which runs across the different Churches. Such invisible spiritual unity is in turn in vital need for the discernment of theology and of the Magisterium, to prevent it from falling into the danger of fundamentalism and of unrestrained subjectivism. And yet, once that temptation has been overcome, one cannot afford to ignore it.

A genuine 'spiritual ecumenism' does not only consist in praying for the unity of Christians, but in sharing the same experience of the Holy Spirit. It consists in what Augustine calls the 'societas sanctorum,' the communion of saints, which at times may regrettably fail to coincide with the 'communio sacramentorum,' that is sharing the same sacramental signs.

Faith in the divinity of Christ is important above all in view of evangelization. There are certain metal structures and buildings that fall if one touches a certain point or removes a certain stone. The building of Christian faith is like that, and its 'corner stone' is the divinity of Christ. Once that has been removed, everything falls apart and collapses, starting from faith in the Trinity. Who is the Trinity made up of if Christ is not God? It is not accidental that once the divinity of Christ is bracketed, the Trinity is also bracketed.

Saint Augustine said: 'It is no great feat to believe that Jesus died; this is believed even by pagans and reprobates; everyone believes in that. But it is a really great feat to believe that he has risen.' And he concluded: 'Christian faith is the resurrection of Christ.' The

same thing must be said of the humanity and the divinity of Christ, which are respectively manifested in his death and resurrection. Everyone believes that Jesus is a man; what makes a difference between believers and non-believers is believing that he is also God. Christian faith is the divinity of Christ.

'Knowing Christ is recognizing his benefits'

'Knowing Christ', said the Reformers, 'is recognizing his benefits.' Let us end precisely by recalling some of these benefits, capable of meeting the deepest needs of our contemporaries: the need of finding meaning in life and overcoming death.

It is not true that modern man has stopped wondering about the meaning of life. Some years ago, a well-known intellectual wrote: 'Religion will die. It is not a wish, nor is it a prophecy for that matter. It is already a fact that is already awaiting its fulfillment ... As soon as our generation and perhaps that of our children have passed, no one will ever consider the need to give life a meaning a truly fundamental problem... Technology has brought religion to its twilight'. Surely, the ultimate meaning of life is not an issue for those who have assigned themselves other meanings. As soon as the latter – youth, health, fame – vanish, many people start asking that question again. It is coming up again even more at this time of the pandemic in which men and women, often confined to their homes, have finally had the time to reflect and to ask questions.

There is a painting, one of the most famous paintings in modern art, that visually conveys where the conviction that life has no meaning ultimately leads. On a reddish background, a man runs across a bridge and past two individuals who look like they do not know or care about anything; his eyes are wide open; he cries out with his hands around his mouth in what is clearly a desperate cry. I am speaking,

of course, of Edvard Munch's painting "The Scream".

Jesus said: 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.' (Jn 8:12). Whoever believes in Christ can resist the great temptation of seeing no meaning in life, which often leads to suicide. Whoever believes in Christ does not walk in darkness: they know where they come from and where they are going and what they are supposed to do in the meantime. Above all they know they are loved by someone and that that someone gave his own life to prove it to them!

Jesus also said: 'I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live' (Jn 11:25). And later the evangelist would be writing to Christians: 'I write these things to you so that you may know that you have eternal life, you who believe in the name of the Son of God [...] He is the true God and eternal life' (1 Jn 5:13, 20). Precisely because Christ is 'the true God,' he is also 'eternal life' and gives eternal life. This does not necessarily remove the fear of death but gives the believer the certainty that our life does not end with death.

Let something of all this spring back to mind on Sundays when we proclaim the second article of the Creed as we do now: We 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.

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Diary*, II, A 110 (year 1837).
2. Pliny the Younger, *Epistularum liber*, X, 96.
3. Philipp Melancthon, *Loci theologici*, in *Corpus Reformatorum*, Brunsvigae 1854, p. 85.
4. See Gandhi on Christianity. Robert Ellsberg (ed). Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991.
5. R. Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen*, II, Tübingen 1938, p. 258.
6. St Jerome, *Dialogus contra Luciferianos*, 19 (PL 23, 181): 'Ingemuit totus orbis et arianum se esse miratus est.'
7. Mk 13:31; Mt 24:35; Lk 21:33.
8. St Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 26,2 (PL 35,1607).
9. St Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 120, 6.
10. In the magazine *MicroMega* 2, 2000, pp. 187f.



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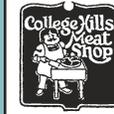


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