

He dwelt among us, full of grace and truth

We have been reflecting on Christ's knowledge during his earthly life – in particular, his beatific vision of his heavenly Father and his 'fullness of understanding of the eternal plans he had come to reveal'. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 474)

As we've seen, the true Catholic doctrine on Our Lord's knowledge has several layers, avoiding a series of mutually opposed errors. First, we obviously reject the basic error of denying Christ's divinity altogether: we affirm that Christ is truly God, and in his divine nature knows all things.

But there is a second possible layer of error, opposite in direction. Someone might rightly emphasise Christ's divinity, yet not understand the reality of the Incarnation: that God has truly become man. We think of the heresy of Docetism, which held Christ's humanity to be not real, a mere appearance; (cf. *Catechism* 465) or the heresy of Apollinarius, who accepted Christ's true *body* but held that the human *soul* was replaced by the divine Word. (cf. *Catechism* 471)

Against these heresies, the Church affirms that God the Son, while remaining fully God, assumed into the unity of his person a true and complete human nature: a body animated by a human soul. And his divinity and humanity are not 'blended' together, as if he had a single new nature intermediate between the two. Rather, the two natures each remain distinct and complete.

So during his life on earth, and now forever, Christ has the same right to the name 'human' as the rest of us. In the words of Vatican II: '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.' (*Gaudium et spes* 22, quoted in *Catechism* 470)

But reacting against denial of Christ's humanity, some can fall into a third layer of error, going too far in the opposite direction, unduly restricting his knowledge. Rightly upholding his human mind and natural human knowledge, they fall short regarding the Catholic teaching on the *special* knowledge his human mind nonetheless enjoyed – in particular, his immediate vision of his heavenly Father. (cf. *Catechism* 473) Against this, Our Lord himself states: 'Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he *has seen* the Father.' (*Jn* 6:46)

The error of denying Christ's special knowledge can arise from a misconception that belief in this would dilute his true humanity – a sort of Docetism. In reaction, Christ might wrongly be portrayed as only gradually realising his own divine identity and mission. An endpoint could even be the sidelining of various of his teachings as 'an earlier stage of his development' or his 'cultural limitation'. The authority of Christ's words would thus give way to ourselves as final arbiters of which teachings are true: Christ would no longer be the definitive Revealer.

The whole error rests on a defective understanding of the Incarnation. Christ's humanity exists in union with his divine person, and although that in no way alters his essential human nature, it does have consequences in his human life. Christ's human intellect and will, as the *Catechism* explains, are 'perfectly attuned and subject to his divine intellect and divine will'. (482) And this attunement of the human mind to the divine mind is by a certain sharing in its knowledge.

Thus the beatific vision of the Father possessed by Christ's soul does not contradict his human nature. Neither does it derive from human nature, but from the union of humanity with divinity in his one person. (Similarly, the beatific vision received by *any* human soul in heaven neither contradicts the soul's nature, nor derives from its own natural powers. It is possible only by God's gift, received by union with the person of Christ: he has gone before us in this vision.)

The International Theological Commission (an advisory body to the Holy See) published a document, *The Consciousness of Christ Concerning Himself and His Mission* (1985). From the scriptural data, it expounds ‘what the Faith has always believed about Christ’ regarding his human awareness on four specific points: his divine identity; his salvific mission, above all in giving his life ‘as a ransom for many’ (*Mk* 10:45); his foundation of the Church; and his personal love and self-offering for each individual one of us.

But beyond these central points, the *Catechism* affirms that ‘the human nature of God’s Son ...knew and showed forth in itself *everything* that pertains to God.’ (473, quoting St Maximus; emphasis added) The theological tradition, which the Magisterium has supported, (cf. DS 3432-35; 3645-47) has indeed held that in the vision of God, Christ’s soul beheld *all* realities, past, present and future (though not all things *possible* to God’s infinite power, as that would involve having infinite knowledge). (Cf. St Thomas Aquinas *ST* IIIa, 10, 2)

And following St Thomas, Pope Pius XII taught that in addition to the beatific vision, Our Lord’s soul had *infused* knowledge. (*Haurietis Aquas* 56 (1956)) This is like that received by the Angels as their natural endowment. As scriptural basis for this, St Thomas quotes St Paul’s affirmation that in Christ ‘are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.’ (*Col* 2:3)

Having affirmed the unique knowledge that Christ possessed even in his human mind, enabling him to reveal God to us, we must also re-emphasise the reality of his *natural* human knowledge. We recall that human knowledge is a function not simply of the spiritual soul but also of the body, involving the senses and the brain. (Intellect and will, certainly, are essentially spiritual powers of human nature, transcending the body; but they still rely on input from the senses.)

So Christ’s natural cognitive faculties gradually became operative as a function of his bodily development. And as with anyone, from what he sensed and experienced in his body in the course of time, his intellect formulated new rational concepts – different in kind, obviously, from the divine essence he already experienced in the beatific vision, or from the infused forms in his soul, which are natural to angelic intellects, not human.

Thus by his natural human development did Jesus ‘increase in wisdom and in stature’, as St Luke says. (*Lk* 2:52) So the *Catechism* tells us: ‘The Son of God who became Son of the Virgin also learned to pray according to his human heart. He learns the formulas of prayer from his mother...He learns to pray in the words and rhythms of the prayer of his people...’ (2599) This learning involves not only the soul but the body, as habits and brain connections are formed.

The *Catechism* states that Christ ‘would even have to inquire for himself about what one in the human condition can learn only from experience.’ (472) In the Gospels he asks questions (e.g. *Mk* 6:38; *Jn* 11:34), and presumably, would naturally formulate fresh concepts from the answers received. How does this relate to what he already knew from divine sources? Mystery remains.

It is futile to try to imagine ‘what it would have been like’ for Our Lord in his humanity to have these combined sources of knowledge – the beatific vision, infused knowledge, and natural human cognition. Here our own limited experience, information and concepts fall hopelessly short; failure to realise this leads us only to conundrums.

But the full Catholic doctrine that we have surveyed reaffirms our understanding and full confidence that ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, *full of grace and truth*...No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.’ (*Jn* 1:14, 18)