

The Incarnation:  
Why God Wanted to Become Human

by Kenneth R. Overberg, S.J.

**The Word of God,**  
*through whom all things were made, was made flesh, so that as a perfect man he could save all women and men and sum up all things in himself. The Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of the desires of history and civilization, the center of humanity, the joy of all hearts, and the fulfillment of all aspirations....*  
' *Vatican II's "Church in the Modern World," #45.*

The Christian community has long reflected on the questions, What was the purpose of Jesus' life? Or simply, Why Jesus? This article presents some of the key insights of the different perspectives and suggests some implications for our everyday relationship to God.

Why Jesus? The answer most frequently handed on in everyday religion emphasizes redemption. This view returns to the creation story and sees in Adam and Eve's sin a fundamental alienation from God, a separation so profound that God must intervene to overcome it. The Incarnation, the Word becoming flesh, is considered God's action to right this original wrong. Redemption, then, is basically understood as a "buying back."

How did this view develop? Just as we do when we face tragedy, especially innocent suffering, so the early followers of Jesus tried to make sense of his horrible death. They asked: Why? They sought insight from their Jewish practices like Temple sacrifices and from their Scriptures.

Certain rites and passages (the suffering servant in Isaiah, psalms of lament, wisdom literature on the suffering righteous person) seemed to fit the terrible end of Jesus' life and so offered an answer to the why question. Understandably, these powerful images colored the entire story, including the meaning of Jesus' birth and life.

Throughout the centuries, Christian theology and piety have developed these interpretations of Jesus' execution. At times God has even been described as demanding Jesus' suffering and death as a means of atonement—to satisfy and appease an angry God. In many forms of theology, popular piety and religious practice, the purpose of Jesus' life is directly linked to original sin and all human sinfulness. Without sin, there would have been no need for the Incarnation.

**'For God so loved the world**  
*that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.'*  
—*John 3:16*

### **Creation for Incarnation**

An interpretation that highlights the Incarnation stands beside this dominant view with its emphasis on sin. The alternate view is also expressed in Scripture and tradition. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the Word made flesh has remained less well-known, rarely gaining the same recognition and influence as the atonement view.

What, briefly, is the heart of this alternate interpretation? It holds that the whole purpose of creation is for the Incarnation, God's sharing of life and love in a unique and definitive way. God becoming human is not an afterthought, an event to make up for original sin and human sinfulness. Incarnation is God's first thought, the original design for all creation. The purpose of Jesus' life is the fulfillment of God's eternal longing to become human.

For many of us who have lived a lifetime with the atonement view, it may be hard at first to hear this alternate view. Yet it may offer some wonderful surprises for our relationship with God.

From this perspective, God is appreciated with a different emphasis. God is not an angry or vindictive God, demanding the suffering and death of Jesus as a payment for past sin. God is, instead, a gracious God, sharing divine life and love in creation and in the Incarnation (like parents sharing their love in the life of a new child). Evidently, such a view can dramatically change our image of God, our celebration of Christmas, our day-by-day prayer.

In order to appreciate this emphasis more fully, let's take the time and effort to look at several of its most important expressions in Scripture and tradition. This brief review will also remind us that the focus on the Incarnation is not just a new fad or some recent "feel good" theology. Its roots go back to the very beginning of Christianity.

### **He Pitched His Tent Among Us**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be....And the Word became flesh...." The Prologue of John's Gospel (1:1-18) gives us this magnificent vision, proclaiming that all creation came to be in the Word, God's self-expression who became flesh, Jesus.

John's meditation of God's supreme act of love in the Incarnation (also see 3:16) has led some theologians to consider that this event alone was sufficient to save the world. Indeed, John's Gospel does not see Jesus' death as a ransom (unlike the other Gospels, for example, Mark 10:45), nor does it use the language of sacrifice or atonement. There is instead emphasis on friendship, intimacy, mutuality, service, faithful love—revealing God's desire and gift for the full flourishing of humanity, or in other words, salvation (see the "Farewell Address," John 13:1-17:26).

Jesus' crucifixion (usually described as being "lifted up") is part of his "hour" of glorification, which also includes his resurrection and ascension. For John, this hour is not sacrifice but epiphany, the manifestation of God.

We may impose sacrificial imagery on John's Gospel because in our hearts and minds we blend together the four Gospels, even though they give us very different portraits of Jesus. If we pay attention to John's emphasis on the Incarnation and on the truth of God revealed in Jesus, we discover part of the foundation of our alternate answer to "Why Jesus?" For John, what is at the heart of reality is a God who wants to share divine life.

### **A Plan for the Fullness of Time**

Another part of the foundation comes from the letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians. These two letters, written in the tradition of Paul in the latter part of the first century, also offer a cosmic vision from the beginning of time to final fulfillment. They express remarkable beliefs: that Christ is the image of the invisible God, that God chose believers before the foundation of the world, that the goal of God's plan was the coming of Christ, that all things not only find their origin in Christ but are now held together in him and will be fulfilled in God through Christ.

Like John's Prologue, the letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians connect with and express the Jewish Wisdom tradition (see, for example, Proverbs 8, Wisdom 7 and 9). Wisdom was present with God from the beginning; everything was created in and through Wisdom. Unlike John's Gospel, these two letters include Paul's theology of the cross with its imagery of ransom and sacrifice.

Ephesians and Colossians offer a magnificent vision of God's plan and initiative, revealed and fulfilled in Christ. This plan of salvation, an expression of God's wisdom, is eternal and not just an afterthought to sin. The letters acknowledge sin and sacrifice, but emphasize God's overflowing love from before

creation until final fulfillment of the universe.

### **A Dance of Love**

Throughout the centuries, the Christian community has carried on a dialogue with the Scriptures and the community's experience, always searching for understanding and appropriate ways to express its beliefs. Naturally, individual theologians and Church councils made use of the philosophies and other insights of their age.

During the first centuries of Christianity's existence, questions about Jesus and the Trinity raised special interest. How can we speak of this human being who is also God? How can we speak of one God who is Father, Son and Spirit? (What many of us now simply accept as part of our Creed had to be hammered out over many years.)

Three people who played a very important role in that process during the fourth century were St. Basil of Caesarea, St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Gregory of Nazianzus. Because they lived in Cappadocia (an area of present-day Turkey), these three saints are simply called the Cappadocians. For many of us in the West, their thought is not well-known.

A key concept in their teaching about how the Trinity is both one and three is *perichoresis*, a term conveying dynamic and creative energy, eternal movement, mutuality and interrelatedness. The three divine persons are what they are by relation to one another. Some scholars like to use the image of dance to describe this term. In this divine dance there is an eternal movement of reciprocal giving and receiving, expressing the essence and unity of God. Moreover this interrelatedness of the triune God is not self-contained but is poured out in creation, Incarnation and final fulfillment. God is overflowing love, leading humanity and all creation into the divine dance of God's life.

### **A Franciscan View**

Hundreds of years later, in the Middle Ages, the question about Jesus was expressed very explicitly: Would the Son of God have become incarnate if humanity had not sinned? The great Dominican theologian St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) answered in the negative, viewing the Incarnation as a remedy for sin.

Another great philosopher and theologian, Franciscan John Duns Scotus (1266-1308), disagreed with Thomas's emphasis on sin. Indeed, Duns Scotus boldly proclaimed and defended the primacy of the Incarnation. He based his view on the Scriptures and early theologians and on logic. He argued, for example, that God's supreme work, the Incarnation, had to be first and foremost in God's mind. It could not be dependent on or occasioned by any action of humans, especially sin.

Even more than logic, Duns Scotus emphasized divine love. God is love and created all life in order to communicate to creatures the fullness of divine love. The Incarnate Word is the foundation of the creative plan of God, the very reason for the existence of all creation. This emphasis on Christ as the center and cornerstone of all creation has become an essential dimension of Franciscan life and ministry.

**'I am the Alpha and the Omega,  
the first and the last, the beginning and the end.'**  
—Rev 22:13

### **Alpha and Omega**

New and different questions emerged in the 20th century. Jesuit scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin confronted the reality of evolution and realized the need for a new way to speak of the mystery of God. As a paleontologist, Teilhard studied fossils and other clues of our ancient past. As a believer, he

returned to the foundations in Colossians and Ephesians and built on the long tradition that proclaimed Christ as the reason for the entire order of creation. He saw Christ as the Alpha, the very beginning of the evolutionary process, in whom all things were created (Colossians 1:15).

Teilhard especially looked to the future. From the scientific perspective, he saw that there had to be a point that governs the whole of evolution, a power of attraction that provides evolution's intrinsic drive and orientation. From the faith perspective, he saw that the glorified Christ is the Omega, the final point in whom all things will be gathered up (Ephesians 1:10). Teilhard realized that the two perspectives focused on the same reality: Christ, the very soul of evolution, the Omega point in whom everything will be unified by and in love.

Teilhard struggled to heal the deep tension between science and religion that led so many to turn away from belief in God. He offered to the modern world a positive worldview, uniting evolution and human efforts with the presence and action of Christ, all the while acknowledging the dark reality of evil.

**'God has given us the wisdom**

***to understand fully the mystery, the plan he was pleased to decree in Christ, to be carried out in the fullness of time: namely to bring all things in the heavens and on earth into one under Christ's leadership.'***

**—Eph 1:9, 10**

### **God's Self-communication**

The 20th century continued to raise serious questions and challenges to faith and religion. Numerous wars and other horrors led to pessimism and cynicism, doubt and denial. Relying on his extensive knowledge of the Christian tradition and of contemporary philosophies, Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904-1984) developed a profound response to these questions and challenges.

Rahner always stressed that God is holy and incomprehensible mystery. We have come to know the Trinitarian God (but never fully) in and through God's wonderful deeds in the world and in history. The very heart of this revelation, Rahner proclaimed, is Godself-communication: God's overflowing love leading to Jesus and so first to creation and grace and ultimately to beatific vision. God's free decision to communicate divine life can be viewed as the reason for the world.

God's self-communication also occurs in the depths of our being. Rahner understood the human person as spirit in the world, a finite being with an infinite capacity. If we are to satisfy our deepest human yearnings, we need grace. For Rahner, grace is Godself-gift, God's personal fulfillment of our natural openness, offered freely to all persons, transforming the core of human life.

Rahner affirmed the presence of God in the whole world. All human experience offers the possibility of encounter with God. God's love is also the real basis of the world's hope. God's self-communication as beatific vision will be the final fulfillment of all history and peoples. Then, indeed, God will be "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).

### **What Difference Does It Make?**

For almost 2000 years, believers have found hope and light in recognizing the primacy of the Incarnation. God's overflowing love wants to embody itself in and for others. Jesus is the first thought, not an afterthought. Does this remarkable belief make any difference in our lives? Absolutely, especially for those of us whose faith has been shaped by images of atonement and expiation.

*First*, the perspective of creation-for-Incarnation highlights the rich meaning of Jesus. He is not Plan B, sent simply to make up for sin. As Duns Scotus emphasized so well, God's masterpiece must result from something much greater and more positive (God's desire to share life and love). Jesus is the culmination of God's self-gift to the world.

*Second*, the focus on the Word made flesh helps us to appreciate the depth of our humanness and the importance of our actions. Rahner's marvelous musings on our life in a world of grace give us renewed understanding of the biblical phrase "created in God's image"—along with many implications for how we treat all our sisters and brothers in the human family and the earth itself.

*Third and most important*, our alternate view offers us a new and transformed image of God. Many people suspect that the dominant perspective of God demanding the suffering and death of the Son as atonement somehow missed the mark.

Indeed, Rahner gently says that the idea of a sacrifice of blood offered to God may have been current at the time of Jesus, but is of little help today. Rahner offers other interpretations of how Jesus saves us, emphasizing that God's saving will for all people was fully realized in Jesus through the response of his whole life.

Other contemporary scholars, including Walter Wink, are more direct. He states that the early disciples simply were unable to sustain Jesus' vision of the compassionate and nonviolent reign of God. Overwhelmed by Jesus' horrible death and searching for some meaning, the disciples slipped back into an older religious conviction that believed violence (sacrifice) saves.

The emphasis on Jesus as the first thought can free us from those images and allows us to focus on God's overflowing love. This love is the very life of the Trinity and spills over into creation, grace, Incarnation, and final flourishing and fulfillment.

What a difference this makes for our relationship with God! We are invited into this divine dance. Life and love, not suffering and death, become the core of our spirituality and our morality.

"In the beginning was the Word...and the Word became flesh." Alleluia!

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