

Did Jesus Always Know He Was God?

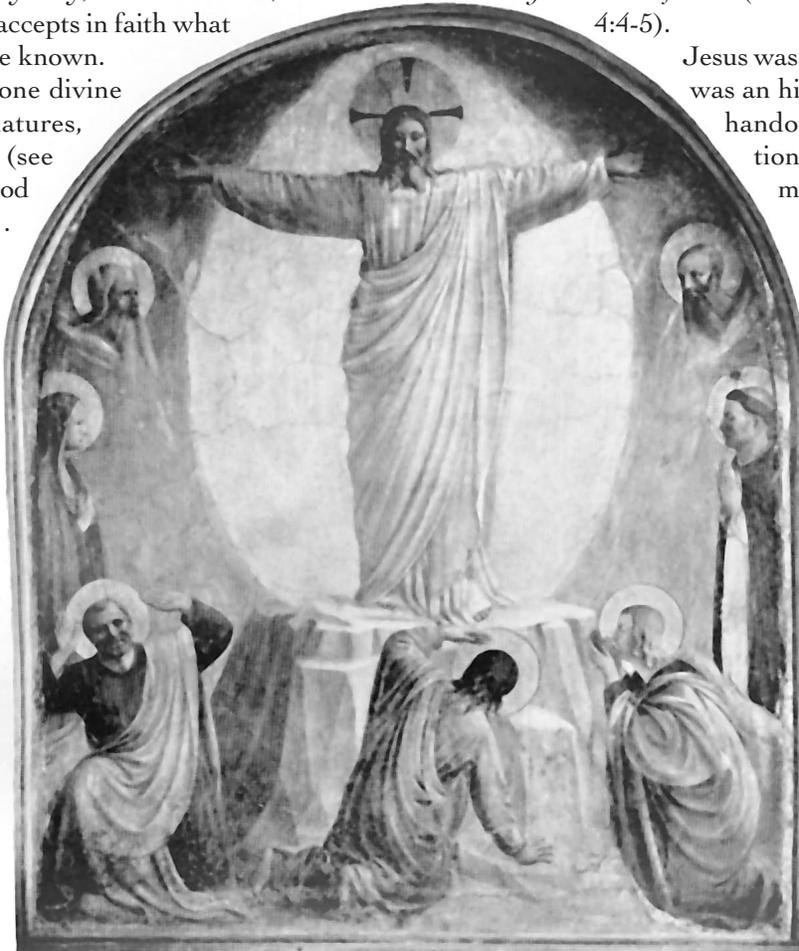
Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the Heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ~ Hebrews 4:14-15

JESUS CHRIST IS TRUE GOD AND TRUE MAN. This fact is a mystery, something beyond our complete comprehension but not totally beyond our exploration and partial understanding. When the human intellect reaches its limit in grasping at the meaning of mystery, the human will, responding to grace, accepts in faith what cannot otherwise be known.

Jesus Christ is one divine Person with two natures, divine and human (see handout on True God and True Man). When he came to earth, he came to be like us in all things, except sin: *“Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people”* (Heb 2:17). His divinity took a human soul, a human intellect and will, and a human body. The Incarnation was a true union of the Infinite and the finite. Here was God, the second person of the Blessed Trinity, hum-

bling himself to accept, for our sake, the limitations of a finite creature. He did not surrender divinity, but offered it to his Father in human form to reconcile us to his Father: *“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”* (2 Cor 5:21; see also Gal 4:4-5).

Jesus was indeed true man; he was an historical person (see handout on The Incarnation). But unlike most men, Jesus came with a divine purpose. He had a mission. He had a message from his Father to transmit, a way of salvation to preach, a self-sacrifice to make, and a Kingdom to establish that was to last into eternity. No solely human creature, finite by nature, can achieve an infinite, divine purpose. He was a man, but he was more than a man. And he set out in his ministry to bring others to see and believe that he had a divine message, that he himself was divine,



The Transfiguration, by Fra Angelico, 1587-1455

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and that he therefore was the legitimate, the promised, Savior of humanity. Our redemption depends on the genuineness of both his manhood and his divinity.

At the very moment of conception, the second person of the Trinity knew that he was united to a human nature, and his human soul knew that it was informed by, and totally united to, divinity. As an embryo, as a fetus, as an infant, as a child, and as

a man, in whatever way Jesus could relate to this awareness, he did so fully. We can think about what it means that God took to himself a human nature and became man, but it is also part of the mystery to consider what it must have meant to Jesus, who was human like us, to know that he was God. Enjoying the Beatific Vision, his human soul could not help but see his own divinity, and, as a consequence, have “in his human knowledge the fullness of understanding of the eternal plans he had come to reveal” (CCC 474).

On earth, Jesus appeared to *all* first simply as a human being, fully knowing that he had to bring others to see his divinity. He did and said things that gradually changed the consciousness of others to see and accept him as something more. He told a Samaritan woman at a well many things that he could not possibly have known on a human level, for she ran to her townspeople, exclaiming, “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” (Jn 4:29). Not long into his ministry, people

saw him as prophet (see Lk 7:16) and as a miracle-worker who could heal all ills (see Mt 4:24) and feed thousands (see Lk 9:12-17). He amazed those who saw the miracles, as when he walked on water and calmed storms at sea (see Mt 14:22-33; Mk 4:35-41). He was seen as a teacher with authority greater than the scribes (see Mt 7:28-29), as a possible king (see Jn 6:14-15), as the promised Messiah (see Jn 1:41; Jn 7:25-31; Jn 11:27). They began thinking

and questioning among themselves about him: where he came from (see Jn 7:41-42), where he got his wisdom and his power to do things (see Mk 6:2-3), and what it meant that he claimed the right to forgive sins (see Lk 5:21). He knew the secret thoughts of many (see Mt 9:4; Mt 12:25; Lk 6:8; Lk 9:47). And then they heard him say, “before Abraham was, I am” (Jn 8:58). They now knew that he claimed to

be divine, but this fact many were not ready to accept.

Jesus’ apostles saw him day and night for years. They saw and heard things that others did not experience. They, like the crowds who also followed him, grew in knowledge and understanding. Peter, the first among the apostles to grasp the divinity of Jesus, was especially blessed by God with insight into the mystery of the Incarnation. When Jesus asked the apostles who they thought he was, it was Peter who boldly proclaimed, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16).

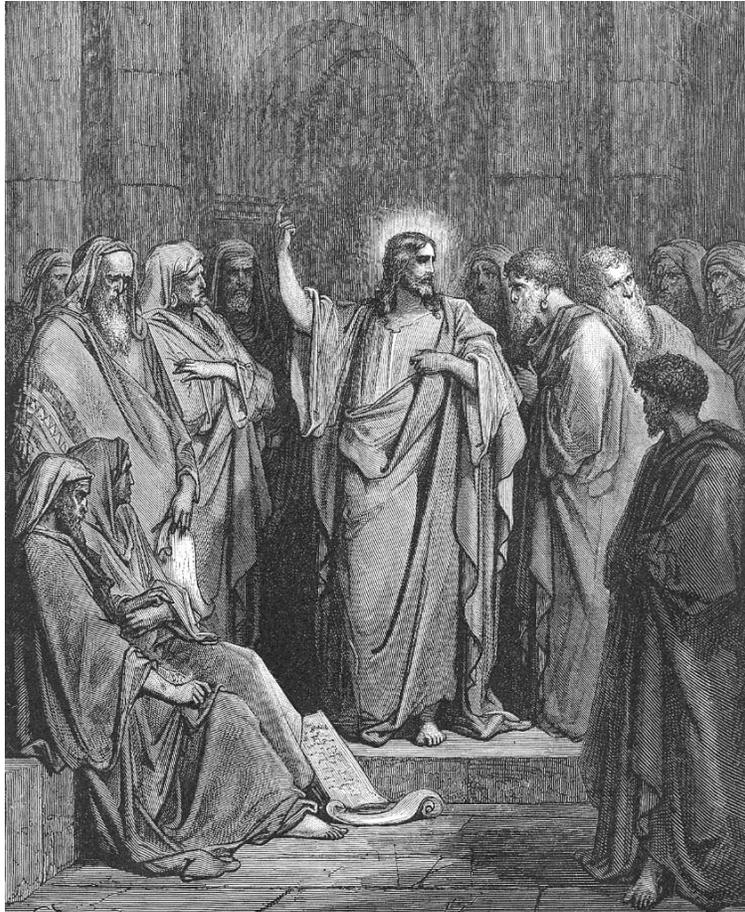
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Head of the Boy Christ, by Heinrich Hofmann, 1824-1911

When everyone else had left him after he had told the crowd in the synagogue in Capernaum that he himself was the Bread of Life, and that they would have to eat his Flesh and drink his Blood if they wished to live with God forever, it was Peter who held the apostles by Jesus' side: *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God"* (Jn 6:68-69).

But not all the apostles truly believed that Jesus was God as early as did Peter. Judas, the betrayer, addressed Jesus as "Master," not "Lord," when he brought those sent to arrest Jesus to the Mount of Olives (see Mt 26:49), and saw only Jesus' innocence and not his divinity when he recognized the enormity of the betrayal (see Mt 27:4). None of the apostles truly expected Jesus' Resurrection (see Lk 24:10-11), even though he had said that he would rise three days after his death (see Mt 12:39-40; Mk 8:31; Mk 9:31). Thomas could not even believe the testimony of his fellow apostles until he had seen and touched the risen Jesus for himself, and only then did he worship, saying: *"My Lord and my God!"* (Jn 20:28). Astonishingly, some of the apostles *still* wavered. We learn at the very end of the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus sends them to baptize and teach the whole world, that *"when they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted"* (Mt 28:17). It was only the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that enlightened them all (see Acts 2:4).



Christ in the Synagogue, by Gustave Doré, 1835-1885

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lem (see Mk 10:32-34), and that he would die on a cross (see Jn 3:14).

There are instances in the Gospels that seem at first glance to indicate that Jesus lacked knowledge of his divinity. His consciousness was given within a true human knowledge that, by definition, is limited, as St. Luke tells us: *"Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man"* (Lk 2:52). And yet that limitation had not prevented Jesus from knowing his Heavenly Father even before his maturity, as the Evangelist makes clear (see Lk 2:49). Jesus humbly accepted the human limitation on his knowledge as part of the human condition that he had assumed for our sake.

Once, when he was asked about the day of his return, Jesus responded, *"of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in Heaven, nor the Son, but*

Jesus' consciousness of people's sins and pursuit of his salvific mission ultimately led him to Calvary. There he revealed the depths of his love and the magnitude of his descent into our humanity to save us, *"taking the form of a servant, ... he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross"* (Phil 2:7-8). He knew in advance that he would be betrayed by Judas (see Jn 13:21-27), that Peter would deny even acquaintance with him three times (see Lk 22:34), that Peter would repent and turn back to him (see Lk 22:31-32), that he would be tried and sentenced to death in Jerusa-

only the Father" (Mk 13:32). What Jesus was saying, roughly, is this: "So far as human means of knowledge are concerned, I do not have that information." Pope St. Gregory the Great commented: "the Only-begotten, being incarnate and made for us a perfect man, knew indeed *in* the nature of his humanity the day and hour of the judgment, but still it was not *from* the nature of his humanity that he knew it" (Epistle xxxix to Eulogius; italics added). His reason for not revealing the time of his coming was not because he did not know, but because he had not been sent to reveal it, as we learn elsewhere in Scripture: "*It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority*" (Acts 1:7). Nothing about the Father's plan is kept secret from the Son.

Another instance records Jesus' submission of his human will to the will of his Father. Following his Last Supper with his apostles, they went to the garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, across the valley from the great Temple. Knowing that his Passion was about to begin, "*he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch.'*" And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, 'Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt'" (Mk 14:33-36).

Finally, there is the seeming absence of divinity in Jesus in his cry from the Cross: "*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*" (Mk 15:34). The humanity of Jesus bore the horrible consequences of the cumulative burden of the world's sins upon the person of Christ. The vision of the infinite chasm that separated the sin-laden Son who "became sin" for our sake (see 2 Cor 5:21) and his infinitely pure and holy Father was so overpowering and devastating that the



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soul of Jesus screamed in anguish and terrifying fright that his Father might turn away and, perhaps, be lost to him and to us. The cry of the Psalmist that Jesus echoed (see Ps 22:1) was clear evidence of the enormity of Jesus' sin-burdened suffering. So great was his torment, awash in the sense of humanity's ungodly sinfulness, that, perhaps for an instant, it seemed that even his Father would have nothing to do with him, that he would be left to wallow in sin forever, without the sight and love of his beloved Father. His cry was heard on earth and in Heaven. In a short while, the Son of God looked to Heaven in his agony, knew that what he had come to do was accomplished, said, "*Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!*" (Lk 23:46) — and let his body sag in death.

We, in our own striving to see the true God in the true man, first come to know Jesus in the Scriptures and

in the teachings of the Catholic Church. We become aware of the Babe of Bethlehem, the twelve-year-old who was lost to his parents for three days in the Temple, the wonder-worker who fed the multitudes, walked on the waters of the Sea of Galilee, raised Lazarus from the dead, and then submitted to arrest, trial, humiliation, scourging and crowning with thorns, and crucifixion. The life of the God-man makes an impact on our minds. We see a person of extraordinary power, authority, and goodness. Our hearts respond with wonder, respect, gratitude, and love. But faith is needed to make the leap that Peter made, so that we, too, can say: "You are the Son of the living God." Faith like this we get from God's grace and is increased in prayer. Like the blind man, we say to the God we cannot see but can get close enough to touch in the Eucharist, "Lord, that I may see" (see Mt 20:33).

(CCC 464, 469-475)