

Who is Jesus Christ?

By FR. JOHN T. BYRNE

As early as 325 A.D. a church council at Nicea solemnly defined that Jesus Christ was divine. In doing so it merely confirmed in opposition to a serious heresy called Arianism what the Christians of the first centuries believed about Jesus. At another council in Chalcedon in 451 the church defined Christ's full humanity (except for sin). About this the Christians of the first century certainly had no doubt.

These are the two poles so to speak in relation to the Mystery of the Incarnation. Both are important. If Jesus is not divine then it was not God who shared our human condition and the whole meaning of the Incarnation is lost. There have been plenty of good men in the history of the human race—men sent by God—prophets, but the Incarnation signifies a unique event which gave a whole new meaning to human life. Thus the significance of the following passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews:

"Since in Jesus the Son of God we have the supreme high priest . . . It is not as if we had one who was incapable of feeling our weaknesses with us; but we have one who has been tempted in every way that we are, though he is without sin."

Now the problem is that we try to submit mysteries to logical analysis and tend to forget that a mystery frequently implies an apparent contradiction. This is what we can't understand about it. When we really satisfy ourselves that Christ was divine we tend to conclude that therefore he was not totally human. And on the other hand, when we feel that we have established that he was really human, then we conclude that maybe he wasn't divine.

Something like this has been happening in theology today. Theologians feeling that the Church in past times has been emphasizing Christ's divinity to the detriment of his humanity have written extensive treatises highlighting the fact that Christ was human.

Discussions on the human knowledge of

Christ have been frequent. As a result some of those reading this theology have begun to doubt Christ's divinity. Of course they lose sight of the fact that they are reading a theology that is set within the context of the whole mystery of the Incarnation.

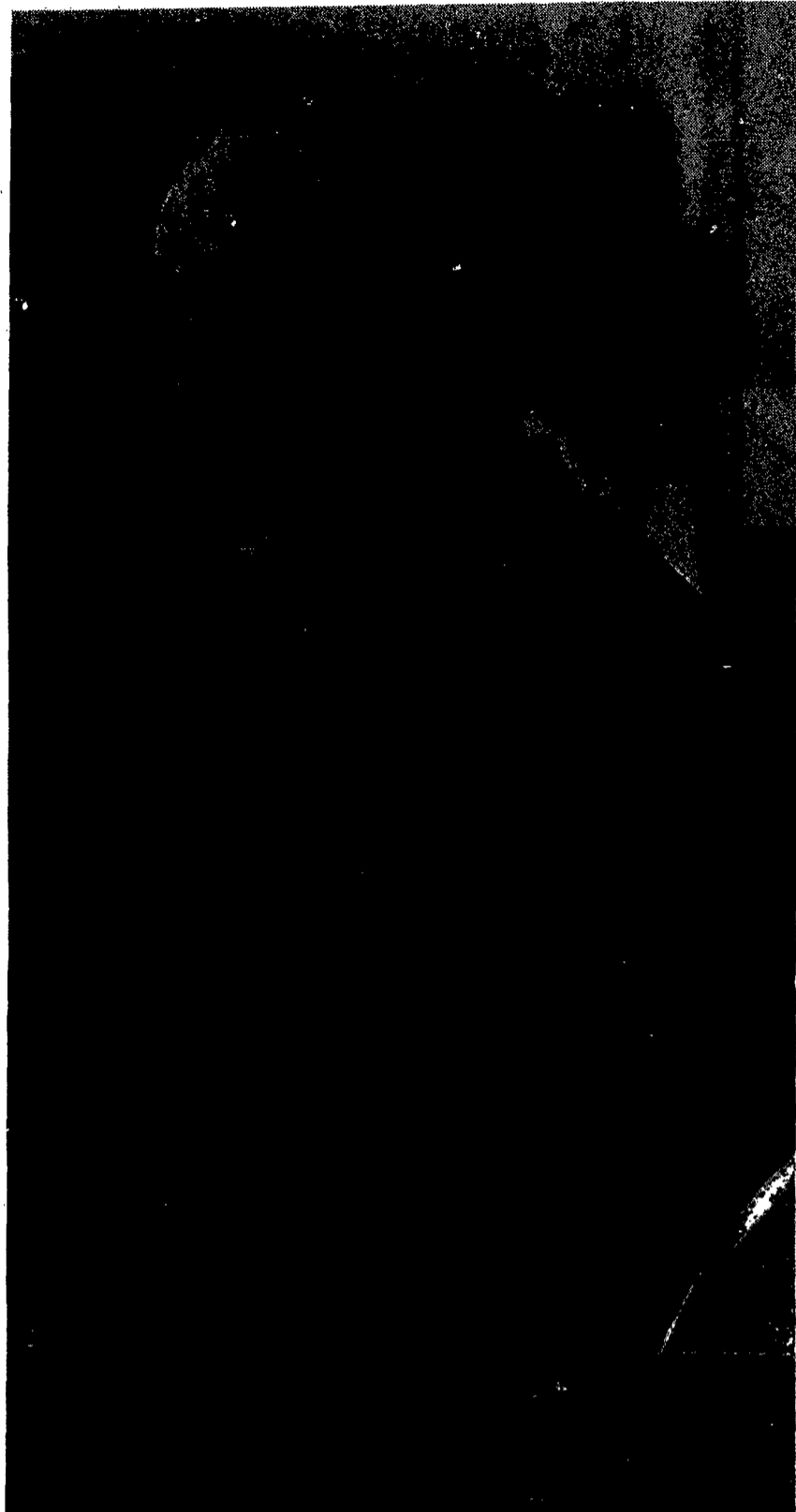
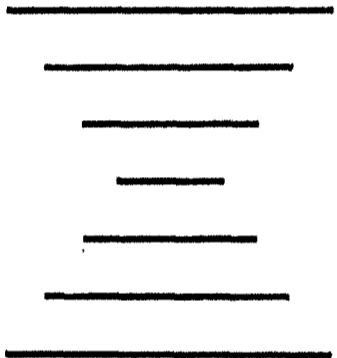
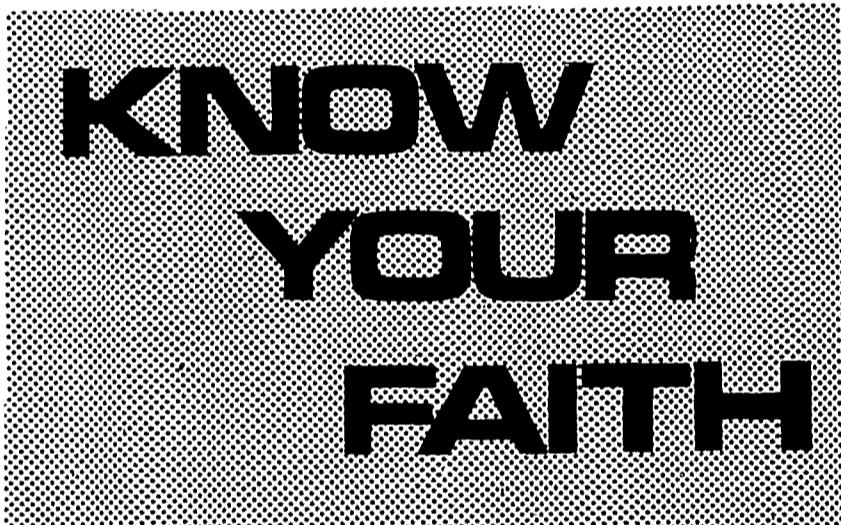
Christ is both God and man. Proving that he was one does not disprove that he was the other. He was both or the Incarnation and with it all of Christianity loses its meaning. One cannot be a Christian if he cannot accept the mystery that links divinity and humanity in the one person of Jesus Christ.

There is an obvious progression of thought on the nature of Jesus in the New Testament. His divinity is implicit in some passages of the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark and Luke) but clear and explicit in St. Paul and St. John.

One of the most clear and significant passages is from St. John's gospel. It is the post-resurrection appearance when Thomas is present. Here Jesus is addressed as God: "My Lord and My God."

As the resurrected Christ stands before the disciples one of their number gives expression to his (and their) faith in Him and it is probable that most of them were not convinced of His divinity before the Resurrection as the Biblical Commission tells us. But in this scene Thomas applies to Christ the two terms applied to God in the Old Testament: God and Lord.

Yet, as one of the council fathers, St. Athanasius, tells us, the definition of Nicea did not depend on any one text of Scripture, but rather it "collected the sense of Scripture." Tradition immediately following Apostolic times was very clear in its expression of the divinity of Christ. This belief is especially found in the writings of St. Clement of Rome (98 A.D.) and St. Ignatius of Antioch (d.107). The Council of Nicea not only collected the sense of Scripture but expressed the clear tradition of the Church of the first three centuries in answering the question: Who is Jesus? It is the same answer that the Church gives clearly and unmistakably today.



Every man keep watch for someone whose joy is contagious, spreading the germ of a full life. (NC Photo)

Preparing Our Gifts

By FR. JOSEPH M. CHAMPLIN

Last week we strongly recommended an offertory procession with representative members of the congregation carrying to the altar bread, water, wine and donations for the Church or poor. In today's column we will do an apparent about-face and maintain the revised Mass in fact no longer contains an offertory ceremony. In its stead liturgical experts have substituted a simple, brief, quiet "Preparation of the Gifts" which scarcely mentions the word "offer."

The explanation is sound enough, but somewhat deep and rather complicated.

Do we really offer ourselves, our money, our symbolic gifts through the collection and during the offertory procession? Yes, after a fashion.

But these outward signs of inner giving, however valuable, important, even necessary for full participation at Mass, possess only limited value with the Father in heaven. Unless they somehow become one with the unlimited offering of the Son on Calvary at the Last Supper, in the Eucharist such elements never go much beyond their human dimension. They and we should be joined with Christ as he offers himself and us to God.

That union comes not at the so-called offertory, but after the institution narrative or words of consecration in the memorial offering. Eucharistic Prayer II succinctly sums up the intention: "In memory of his death and resurrection, we offer you, Father, this life-giving bread,

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this saving cup." Those words "bread" and "cup" naturally refer to the Risen Jesus body and blood now present in our midst on the altar. It is that spotless, perfect victim we offer, and ourselves with him.

The bearing of gifts from the people to the priest earlier in our services clearly sets the stage and even makes this marvelous offering possible. However, to overemphasize the offertory procession or exaggerate an "offer" concept in the ceremony of preparing host and wine obscures the Holy Sacrifice's ultimate and essential meaning. This latter point prompted liturgical reformers to drop some prayers, shorten others, and completely replace two of these texts.

The celebrant still cleanses his hands, not so much for practical purposes as for its sign value — to express a desire for inward purification. I hope an increasing number of pastors follow the example of Monsignor Nugent, rector of St. Charles' Cathedral in Orlando, Fla., and obtain large, attractive pitchers and basins for this gesture. It can speak to modern man, but only if the priest washes hands (not fingers) in a real basin (not finger bowl) and dries them with a true towel (not tiny piece of linen) as he pleads, "Lord, wash away my iniquity; cleanse me from my sin."

During Christ's time, Jews, Greeks, Roman, all of them diluted their heavy and heady wine with some water. The first Christians followed this same procedure. But soon, as early as the second and third centuries, that practical step assumed deeper meanings. It came to symbolize a wedding of God and man in Jesus, to signify a mysterious blending of the divine and human in Christ, to stress a similar mixing in ourselves of this wonderful world on earth with the heavenly life of grace.

We continue to mix water and wine in the new Order of Mass. No blessing or sign of the cross here — that comes only once, later, before the "consecration" when we ask our Father to send his Spirit upon the gifts. And we employ fewer, clearer words. "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity."

As the celebrant slightly elevates bread and wine, he recites (for all to hear, if they are not singing) two prayers totally different from those in the older offertory rite. Taken from formulas used in Jewish worship at meals, each is called technically a "berakah" or a blessing. We bless God for certain gifts. Praise might be the more accurate and understandable English term.

"Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this wine to offer, fruit of the vine and work of human hands . . ."



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