

# Belly Buttons and the Incarnation

## *What's in a Belly Button?*

The other day I was talking to a friend whose new son was born with a condition requiring immediate surgery. The surgery had happened two months before (successfully), but one of the results was that the child would live the rest of his life with an oddly-shaped scar in place of a belly button. This got me thinking: what does a belly button mean? Why do people sometimes pose inane questions about whether Adam had one? Then I realized that the belly button is actually at the very center of the Christian mystery.

The belly button is the concrete, visible sign of connection to the previous generation; it means your body wasn't created out of nothing. As the remnant of the umbilical cord's entry point, it is permanent proof that you were nourished by your mother for nine months of your life. What is so central to the Christian mystery is not the belly button of Adam but of someone else: Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. This peculiar part of Jesus' body points to the reality of the incarnation, the mystery upon which Christianity stands or falls.

## *The Meaning of the Incarnation*

What is absolutely unique about Christianity is its astounding claim that God has become man. This is called the incarnation (“enfleshment”). That he was born of a *virgin* indicates his divinity, that he was born of a *woman* shows his true humanity. According to the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), Christ is fully human and fully divine – it's not a 50/50 split. United in the one *person* of Christ are two *natures* (human and divine). This union is sometimes called the hypostatic union,<sup>1</sup> and it is the source of our salvation. As the early Church Fathers like Irenaeus (2<sup>nd</sup> c.) and Athanasius (4<sup>th</sup> c.) frequently said, God became man so that man might become divine.

## *The Divinization of Humanity*

Of course, we do not become gods in the mythological, pagan understanding, but we share in God's nature through grace. Because of the fact that divinity and humanity are united in the person of Christ, *our* humanity can now be united with God's divinity. We can share in the nature of the triune God. At first this sounds almost blasphemous, but this is truly what God calls us to. The priest prays for this while preparing the gifts: “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.”

So there's a two-way movement. God humbles himself, stooping downward to us, taking on our nature, so that we can then be elevated, taking on his nature. The incarnation is the basis of our divinization, but it is also the basis of the atonement. By taking on human flesh, Christ was able to pay the penalty for the sin of all humanity through his death on the cross. Before being able to share in God's life and nature, humanity needed to be cleansed of sin. This cleansing is accomplished through Christ offering himself for our sins.

## *Incarnation and the Sacraments*

The incarnation is the foundation of what is sometimes called the *sacramental principle* – the notion that the physical can manifest and communicate the spiritual. This principle touches every aspect of Catholic faith. If Christ hadn't had a physical body, he couldn't have suffered for our sins and saved us. We believe that God uses concrete, material things to bring salvation – things like water, bread, wine, oils, human beings, and organizational structures in the Church. There has always been a tendency to try to 'spiritualize' Christianity by divorcing it from gritty, material reality, but this tendency has always been resisted by the Church. God does not primarily communicate himself to us in an invisible, disembodied

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<sup>1</sup> Which is just a fancy way of saying that his person was united, not divided. In Greek, *hypostasis* meant “person”. So Christ was a single person (that person being the second person of the Trinity, the Word of God) with two natures.

way. He comes to us through sacraments, through relationships, through real, tangible things. He uses our own works in bringing about our salvation. The basis for all this is the fact that God himself came to us in a real, human, material body.

### *Incarnational Heresies*

Virtually every heresy can be connected in some way to a misunderstanding of the incarnation. As early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, St. Irenaeus (bishop of Lyon) wrote that every heresy boils down to a denial of the value of the human body,<sup>2</sup> and therefore a denial of the incarnation. There are basically two sides we can err on in understanding the incarnation.

In the first, we see Jesus as totally divine and ignore his humanity. In this case, he is utterly transcendent and almost unreachable. Sometimes popular Catholic piety has tended in this direction. The problem is that we can't really have a relationship with a Jesus who has nothing in common with us. How can we be consoled in our sufferings by a stoic Jesus who was so heroic that he couldn't suffer? It is hard to see how a Jesus like this could have a belly button. It would seem more likely that he dropped straight out of heaven as a grown man.

The second error is focusing only on his humanity. We see this today in (unfortunately) some "theologians" who search for "the historical Jesus." The assumption here is that the real Jesus was someone completely different from what Christianity has made him out to be. He is seen as a prophet, or a guru, or a revolutionist, or some other purely human category. He is a role model but not a savior. He has a belly button, but it is completely inconsequential.

The problem with these errors is that they both deny that *God became man*. This mystery of the incarnation has confounded people from the beginning. The apostle John writes that the spirit of the antichrist is he who denies that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (1 Jn 4:2-3). What happened in Mary's womb was so wonderful, so astounding, that people have often tried to simplify and truncate the mystery rather than accepting it in all its majesty and boldness.

### *God's Belly Button*

We believe in a God with a belly button, a God who loved us so much that he took on our human flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary. As true God and true man, he was able to atone for sin. Through the perfect union of divinity and humanity in his person, our humanity can now share in God's divinity. We can not only have our sins forgiven and enjoy God's friendship, but we can experience something far greater than Adam and Eve dreamed of: we can become united to our Father and Creator through the miraculous flesh of our Savior, Jesus Christ.



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<sup>2</sup> See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book IV, preface, n. 4.