

“Who Do You Say That I Am?”

When Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter said in reply, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

—Matthew 16:13–16



Focus Question

*How can I learn about Jesus
and know him more deeply?*

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Introduction

GOD OFFERS HIS SON

Main Idea

God's love for human beings is so great that he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to live in the world and to die for the sins of humanity.

Have you ever heard stories from the news of a parent who gave up his or her life for a child? One such person was St. Gianna Beretta Molla, a doctor who lived in Italy during the twentieth century. In 1961, when she was two months pregnant with her fourth child, she was diagnosed with uterine cancer. She had to choose whether to have an abortion or to carry the baby to full term, knowing that doing so would risk her own life. She chose the latter. On April 21, 1962, Holy Saturday, St. Gianna gave birth to her daughter Gianna Emanuela. While the mother survived childbirth, she died one week later of septic poisoning. The daughter, who survived, eventually became a pediatrician like her mother. Gianna Emanuela was also present at her mother's canonization on February 19, 2004.

You can do a search of the news today and find other stories of parents who literally sacrificed their life for their child. For example, in 2008, Thomas Vander Woude died while holding his son Joseph's head above the contents of a septic tank. Joseph, age twenty at the time, has Down syndrome. He had fallen into the tank when the cover collapsed.

Yet even stories like these of a human parent's love for a child only hint at the depth of God the Father's love for you, all the people alive at this moment, and all the people who have ever walked this earth. The Father sacrificed his only Son, Jesus Christ, to bridge the gap between humanity and the eternal life of salvation—to save the world from sin and death.

What God has accomplished for all people through his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, is truly Good News. Jesus is salvation. A verse in the Gospel of John describes this love very well:

NOTE TAKING

Recognizing Important Information. Record the essential question that forms the main subject of this book. Also write down a corollary personal question that is related to this essential question.

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. (Jn 3:16)

John’s Gospel connects belief in Jesus as God’s Son to our achieving eternal life. This is the big reward for us—eternal life. The question of Jesus’ identity, then, is an important one. Certainly, Jesus thought so when he asked the Apostles what people were saying about him (see Matthew 16:13–16, quoted at the beginning of this chapter). Note the various views his contemporaries had of him. Some saw Jesus as John the Baptist reincarnated. Others saw him as Elijah or Jeremiah, famous Old Testament prophets. Still others thought Jesus was a contemporary prophet who shared his origin with the other Old Testament prophets.

All of these were positive views about Jesus, but elsewhere the Gospels reveal that



For centuries, artists have depicted God the Father as present at the Crucifixion of Christ the Son. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, “The sacrifice of Jesus ‘for the sins of the whole world’ expresses his loving communion with the Father. ‘The Father loves me, because I lay down my life,’ said the Lord, [for] I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father” (CCC, 606).

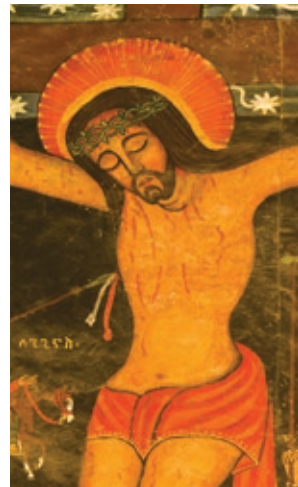
not everyone thought so highly of him. For example, some of the Jewish officials of his day thought of Jesus as a misguided rabbi who was leading the people astray. Some of the leaders even perceived him as a threat to the peace, a fake king who raised false hopes for an oppressed people. They considered Jesus a danger and collaborated with the Romans to put him to death.

It was left to Peter to profess Jesus' true identity: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." But Peter did not discover Jesus' identity on his own: Jesus told Peter,

Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. (Mt 16:17)

Answering the Question "Who Is Jesus?"

Who is Jesus of Nazareth, the person people of faith call the Christ (which means "the Messiah"), the Son of God? This important question is the primary subject of this book. Before examining where you are right now in your



Left: Artist DeVon Cunningham painted this Black Jesus on the dome of St. Cecilia's Church, Detroit, Michigan, in 1968 as a way to connect the parish with the poor African American community surrounding it.

Center: This fourteenth-century Turkish mosaic of Christ dominates the very center of the grand dome of the Hagia Sophia, which was first built in the sixth century.

Right: The Crucifixion of Christ is part of an incredible body of art that covers the interior of the Debre Berhan Selassie Church and Monastery, located in northern Gondar, Ethiopia.

belief about Jesus, read some thoughts about him from various people through the ages:

He changed sunset into sunrise.

—St. Clement of Alexandria
(ca. 150–ca. 215, Church Father)

Jesus whom I know as my Redeemer cannot be less than God.

—St. Athanasius
(ca. 293–373, Egyptian Doctor of the Church)

If Jesus Christ were to come today people would not even crucify him. They would ask him to dinner, and hear what he has to say, and make fun of it.

—Thomas Carlyle
(1795–1881, Scottish essayist and historian)

As a child I received instruction both in the Bible and in the Talmud. I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene. . . . No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life.

—Albert Einstein
(1879–1955, German-born physicist and atheist)

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his

feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

—C. S. Lewis
(1898–1963, British author)

Not only do we not know God except through Jesus Christ; we do not even know ourselves except through Jesus Christ.

—Blaise Pascal
(1623–1662, French mathematician and philosopher)

The purpose of this text is to help you to answer the question “Who is Jesus?” for yourself. This will require a perusal of the Gospels and their portrayal of Jesus. The text will also examine what the Catholic Church believes about this compelling person and discuss how you can meet Jesus today. Here is an overview of the contents of each chapter:

- Chapter 1 introduces the Church’s understanding of Jesus as Christ, stresses the importance of the Incarnation, discusses the historical context of Jesus’ life, lists where you can find Jesus today, and touches on the meanings of the name *Jesus* and the titles *Christ*, *Son of God*, and *Lord*.



The earliest portraits of Christ come from the tombs found in catacombs below Rome and date from the second through fourth centuries.



Learning More about Peter

Peter was the Apostle who acknowledged Jesus to be the Messiah and the Son of God. But Peter was not always a steadfast and dependable friend to Jesus. At times, he was weak and all too human. To learn more about St. Peter, read the following passages, and write answers to the questions listed below.

MATTHEW 4:18-22

- What was Peter's profession?
- Who was his brother?
- Who else were among Jesus' first Apostles?

MATTHEW 8:5, 14

- Where was Peter's home?

LUKE 9:28-36

- Which other Apostles were present at Jesus' Transfiguration?
- Whom did the Apostles see with Jesus?
- What did Peter propose to do?

MARK 14:27-31, 66-72

- What did Peter say he would do rather than deny Jesus?
- Why did the bystanders think Peter was Jesus' companion?
- What did Peter do when he realized he had betrayed Jesus?

JOHN 21:1-19

- What did Peter do once he realized the figure was Jesus?
- How many times did Jesus ask Peter to profess his love?
- How will Peter die?

- Chapter 2 looks at the Christian and non-Christian evidence for Jesus' existence, introduces the formation of the New Testament, and examines how the Church interprets the New Testament.
- Chapter 3 examines the world in which Jesus lived, exploring the history, geography, and social and political climate of first-century Palestine to help you to understand Jesus and his teaching.
- Chapter 4 offers a biography and profile of Jesus, especially focusing on him as teacher and miracle worker, and highlights his mission and message.
- Chapters 5 through 8 examine the four portraits of Jesus as presented in Mark (the Suffering Servant), Matthew (the Teacher), Luke and Acts (the Savior), and John (the Word of God).
- Chapter 9 focuses on what the letters of St. Paul reveal about Jesus.
- Chapter 10 investigates what the other New Testament writings reveal about Jesus, considers the doctrines taught about Jesus by the early Church, and explores how you can find and meet the living Jesus in our world today.

As you begin your study of Jesus Christ, evaluate your own beliefs about him. Do you believe that he existed? Do you believe that he was a great person but not God? Is he your Lord and Savior, or do you simply not know what to believe about Jesus? This textbook and course will help you to know Jesus and clarify his existence as the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

SECTION Assessment

Note Taking

Use the notes you made on the text's essential question to help you to answer the following question.

1. What is the corollary question you added to the text's essential question?

Comprehension

2. Name the various views about Jesus' identity that his disciples reported to him.
3. How did Peter identify Jesus?

Reflection

4. Choose one of the quotations about Jesus from this section and explain what it means to you.
5. Answer the question Jesus posed to Peter: “Do you love me?” Offer evidence for your personal response.

Application

6. Tell about an instance from the news or your experience in which someone gave up his or her life for another.



Section 1

COMING TO KNOW GOD

Main Idea

God implanted in all people a desire to know him. God has revealed himself to humanity most clearly by freely stepping into human history to enact his plan of salvation in Jesus Christ.

The psalmist wrote, “As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God. My being thirsts for God, the living God” (Ps 42:2–3a). St. Augustine of Hippo penned these famous words: “You are great, O Lord, and greatly to be praised. . . . You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Both of these quotations reveal an important truth: God, who created you out of love to share with him his life in eternity, made you in his own image and implanted in you a great desire to see him and to be united with him. “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God” (CCC, 27).

It almost seems as though God implanted a homing device deep within you in order to attract you to himself. For example, you likely have a profound desire to be happy. Yet no possession, award, amount of money, or achievement can satisfy this unquenchable thirst for happiness. Like all true seekers, you will find that only God can fulfill your deep cravings for happiness, for beauty and truth, for goodness and justice, and especially for love.

Your human reason can discover God’s existence with certainty. St. Paul understood this when he wrote,

For what can be known about God is evident . . . because God made it evident. . . . Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made. (Rom 1:19–20)

For example, using your intellect alone, you can come to the logical and correct conclusion that there must be an almighty, all-good Creator God who

NOTE TAKING

Identifying Main Concepts. Make a chart like the one here. As you read this section, record how God reveals himself in each of the ways listed.

HOW GOD REVEALS HIMSELF		
Human reason	Sacred Scripture	Sacred Tradition

brought everything into existence out of nothing. As St. Thomas Aquinas noted, he is a first cause who was not caused by any other. He is the supreme being who brought into existence other beings. He is a grand designer who created all the beauty, symmetry, and power that can be found in the universe.

God Reveals Himself in Salvation History

As the existence of many diverse religions throughout human history attests, human reason alone cannot plumb the depths of God’s great mystery. God’s ways are not your ways; his thoughts are not your thoughts (see Isaiah 55:8). You need God to come to you, to enlighten you about things that you cannot understand. You also need God to give you certitude about those religious



Early Christians believed that they could not depict God because “you cannot see my face, for no one can see me and live” (Ex 33:20) and “no one has ever seen God” (Jn 1:18). However, images of God the Father in human form began to appear in Western art in the tenth century.



and moral truths your mind can grasp (such as the precepts of the Ten Commandments—for example, “You shall not kill”) but about which it is prone to making errors.

Thankfully, out of his infinite love, goodness, and wisdom, God has indeed revealed himself to human beings. The word *revelation* means “unveiling.” Through deeds and words, God freely chose to step into human history to reveal his plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. *Divine Revelation* is God’s free gift of self-communication by which he makes known the mystery of his divine plan. From the creation of Adam and Eve, God has revealed himself as a God of tremendous love, inviting our first parents into intimate union with him. However, their pride prevented them from accepting God’s invitation. After the original sin, God did not cut off relations with them but promised salvation for future generations. The subsequent story of God’s saving activity in human history is known as *salvation history*.

Salvation history reveals how God, out of his infinite love, established a series of covenants with humankind. A

“Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God’s command. . . . Scripture portrays the tragic consequences of this first disobedience. Adam and Eve immediately lose the grace of original holiness” (CCC, 397–399).

📍 The Bethlehem Explosion

Locate and read the poem “The Bethlehem Explosion” by Madeleine L’Engle (1918–2007). Answer: How is the poem a metaphor for Jesus’ coming into the world? Next, sit in a crowded public place, and observe several people. Write a three- to five-paragraph profile of one person you observe. Answer in your profile: In what visible ways is Christ present in this person?

covenant is a sacred agreement between God and human beings. God promised to be faithful to his people forever while human beings were to remain faithful to him. He promised to save and redeem humanity and give the gift of eternal life. One important covenant was with Abraham, to whom God promised many descendants. Another was with the people of Israel, whom God chose as his special people, freeing them from slavery and giving them the Law on Mount Sinai. When Israel fell into sin, the prophets told how God would redeem the people and save all the nations through a promised messiah who would come from the family of King David.

The climax of salvation history was the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the fullness of God’s Revelation. He is God’s Son, the Word-made-flesh who lived among his people. He taught in word and deed about God, and he



This fresco of the Trinity depicts God the Father holding the crucified Christ, and the Holy Spirit, represented by a dove, rests between them. Frescoes are painted directly on the still-wet plastered surface of a wall or ceiling.

completed the Father’s work of salvation. With the coming of Jesus Christ—God’s final Word—and the sending of the Holy Spirit, Revelation is complete. There will be no further Revelation.

The story of salvation history is gathered in one single “deposit” of the Word of God that Christ entrusted to his Apostles. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Apostles handed on this **Deposit of Faith** to be shared through preaching and teaching until Christ comes again. Today, this Deposit of Faith is found in **Sacred Scripture** and in **Sacred Tradition**. They are like two streams that flow from the same fountain of Divine Revelation. Christ entrusted to the successors of the Apostles—the pope and bishops—the important task of interpreting God’s Word, both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. This Christ-appointed teaching authority that resides in the pope and the bishops in communion with the pope is known as the **Magisterium**. With the help of the Holy Spirit, the Magisterium serves the Word of God by listening to it, guarding it, and explaining it faithfully.

Deposit of Faith “The heritage of faith contained in Sacred Scripture and Tradition, handed on in the Church from the time of the Apostles, from which the Magisterium draws all that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed” (CCC, Glossary).

Sacred Scripture The *written* transmission of the Church’s Gospel message found in the Church’s teaching, life, and worship. It is faithfully preserved, handed down, and interpreted by the Church’s Magisterium.

Sacred Tradition The *living* transmission of the Church’s Gospel message found in the Church’s teaching, life, and worship. It is faithfully preserved, handed down, and interpreted by the Church’s Magisterium.

Magisterium The official teaching authority of the Church. Christ bestowed the right and power to teach in his name on Peter and the Apostles and their successors. The Magisterium is the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the bishop of Rome (the pope).

SECTION Assessment

Note Taking

Use the chart you made to help you to answer the following questions.

1. Using your intellect alone, what conclusion can you come to about God?
2. Provide two examples from Sacred Scripture of how God revealed himself to humanity.
3. How is God’s Word, both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, interpreted by the Church?

Comprehension

4. Why was Divine Revelation necessary?

Vocabulary

5. What is meant by the *Deposit of Faith*?

Reflection

6. What is an experience you have had that has helped to reveal God to you?



Section 2

THE INCARNATION: THE FATHER SENDS HIS SON

Main Idea

In the Incarnation, the Son of God took on human flesh in order to teach people how to live and die in him so that they might also rise to new life.

A classic folktale tells of a wise and good king who loved his people. The king wanted to understand his people and learn how they lived. He wanted to endure their same hardships. Many times, he would dress in the clothes of a beggar or a lowly worker and visit the homes of his poor subjects. Little did they know that their visitor was their king.

One time he called on a desperately poor man who lived with his family in a run-down shack. He ate the meager dinner the poor man offered him. He spoke kindly to the man's family and treated them with profound respect and dignity. Then he returned to his palace.

Sometime later, the king stopped by to see the poor man again and revealed his true identity. "I am your king!" he said. The king was surprised that the poor man did not request some gift or money. Instead the man said, "You left your glorious dwelling to visit me and my family in this dank hovel. You ate the barely edible food we ate. You have made me very happy. To others in the kingdom you have given your rich gifts. But to me, you have given yourself!"

The king's actions in this story are reminiscent of what took place in the **Incarnation**. Through an act of incredible humility and love, God's Son took on human nature. The fullness of God's Revelation took place when God became man, when the Father sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to live in the world, to share the Good News, and to die and rise to new life for the salvation of humankind. According to second-century Church Father St. Irenaeus, "The

Incarnation The assumption of a human nature by Jesus Christ, God's eternal Son, who became man in order to save humankind from sin. The term literally means "being made flesh."

NOTE TAKING

Summarizing the Main Idea. Make a list like the one below. Summarize four benefits of the Incarnation using no more than four words for each.

1. Saves and reconciles us
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

word of God, Jesus Christ, on account of his great love for humankind, became what we are in order to make us what he is himself.” This is the mystery of the Incarnation. Belief in this mystery is a distinctive sign of Christian faith.

The essential Catholic **dogma** of the Incarnation holds that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, “assumed a human nature in order to accomplish our salvation in it” (CCC, 461). The Word of God took on human flesh from his mother, Mary, but was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Thus, Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully man.

The prologue to John’s Gospel provides the strong scriptural basis for the doctrine of the Incarnation:

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.



The Youth of Jesus by James Tissot. According to the Brooklyn Museum, which holds the painting, “Anticipating the Passion, in which he will carry the Cross, the young Jesus shoulders a board for use in the shop, while his parents look on with foreboding.”

dogma A central truth of Revelation that Catholics are obliged to believe.

All things came to be through him,
 and without him nothing came to be.
 What came to be through him was life,
 and this life was the light of the human race;
 the light shines in the darkness,
 and the darkness has not overcome it. . . .
 And the Word became flesh
 and made his dwelling among us,
 and we saw his glory,
 the glory as of the Father's only Son,
 full of grace and truth. (Jn 1:1–5, 14)

You might find the expression “the Word became *flesh*” a strange way to state that Jesus became a man. Scholars believe that the Gospel writer selected the word *flesh* to counteract a first-century **heresy**—*Docetism*—that taught that Jesus only *seemed* to be a man. (The word *Docetism* comes from a Greek word meaning “to seem.”) Adherents of this heresy simply could not accept



God creating heaven and earth, from the Loggie of Raphael at the Vatican.

heresy An obstinate denial or doubt after Baptism of a truth that must be believed with faith.

Extending Empathy

By means of the Incarnation, God displayed tremendous empathy for human beings. The word *empathy* implies understanding and entering into another’s feelings. You mirror God’s act of entering into human life—the Incarnation—every time you empathize with another. Empathy can often be a profound act of love. Practice an action of empathy such as one of those suggested below. Afterward, write a three-paragraph reflection that explains what you did, how it made you feel, and how you perceive it impacted others involved.

1. Seek out a lonely classmate and invite him or her to eat lunch with you; listen carefully and attentively to what the person says to you.
2. Spend time helping a younger sibling with homework, or offer to play with him or her.
3. Call a grandparent; ask how things are going, and offer to help with a chore.
4. Encourage a teammate who has been having a rough time lately.

that God would so demean himself to take on all of the weakness of humanity. To Docetists, Jesus was a ghostly figure who only *appeared* to be a man.

A prime danger of Docetism is that if Jesus only *seemed* to be a man, then he only *seemed* to die and resurrect from the dead. These key events—Jesus’ Death and Resurrection—are the basis of salvation. If they were only appearances, then human beings have not really been saved. Additionally, there would be no hope for your own resurrection from the dead.

By using the Greek word *sarx*, which the Latin translates with the root *carne* (meaning “flesh” or “meat”), the author of John’s Gospel was insisting that Jesus was truly human. A human person cannot be *human* without a body. Thus, *Incarnation* literally means that God became flesh.

The Purpose of the Incarnation

The Incarnation—the coming of the Son of God into the world—brings many benefits for all human beings:

First, the Word-made-flesh saves all of humanity by reconciling human beings with the Father. Because of the original sin of Adam and Eve, human beings inherited a fallen nature and were prone to sin, sickness, and death. Jesus' great sacrifice and love heals human nature, overcomes sin, and brings about everlasting life.

Second, as God's Son, Jesus reveals God's love to the world.

Third, as God-made-man, Jesus serves as the perfect model of holiness. He is “the way and the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6) who teaches that the path to holiness is for people to give themselves to others in imitation of him: “Love one another as I love you” (Jn 15:12).

Fourth, by becoming man, the Word of God makes it possible for human beings to share in God's nature. “For the Son of God became man so that we might become God” (St. Athanasius, quoted in CCC, 460).



“The angel Gabriel was sent from God . . . and coming to [Mary], he said, ‘Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you. . . . Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God’” (Lk 1:26–30).