

MALACHI—The teachings of Pope John Paul (NICENE CREED) will be updated elsewhere.

Is Jesus The Son of God?

Interviewer:

From the "problem" of God, let's move on to the "problem" of Jesus, as in fact you have already begun to do. Why isn't Jesus simply considered a wise man like Socrates? Or a prophet like Muhammad? Or enlightened like Buddha? How does one maintain the unprecedented certainty that this Jew condemned to death in an obscure province is the Son of God, of one being with the Father? This radical Christian claim has no parallel in any other religious belief. Saint Paul himself defined it as "a scandal and madness."



Pope John Paul II:

Saint Paul is profoundly aware that Christ is absolutely original and absolutely unique. If he were only a wise man like Socrates, if he were a "prophet" like Muhammad, if he were "enlightened" like Buddha, without any doubt he would not be what he is. He is the one mediator between God and humanity.

He is mediator because he is both God and man. He holds within himself the entire intimate world of divinity, the entire Mystery of the Trinity, and the mystery both of temporal life and of immortality. He is true man. In him the divine is not confused with the human. There remains something essentially divine.

But at the same time Christ is so human! Thanks to this, the entire world of men, the entire history of humanity, finds in him its expression before God. And not before a distant, unreachable God, but before a God that is in him—that indeed is he. This is not found in any other religion, much less in any philosophy.

Christ is unique! Unlike Muhammad, he does more than just promulgate principles of religious discipline to which all God's worshipers must conform. Christ is not simply a wise man as was Socrates, whose free acceptance of death in the name of truth nevertheless has a similarity with the sacrifice of the Cross.

Less still is he similar to Buddha, with his denial of all that is created. Buddha is right when he does not see the possibility of human salvation in creation, but he is wrong when, for that reason, he denies that creation has any value for humanity. Christ does not do this, nor can he do this. He is the eternal witness to the Father and to the love that the Father has had for

his creatures from the beginning. The Creator, from the beginning, saw a multitude of good in creation; he saw it especially in man, made in his image and likeness. He saw this good in his incarnate Son. He saw it as a duty for his Son and for all rational creatures. Pushing the divine vision to the limits, we can say that God saw this good specifically in the passion and in the death of his Son.

This good would be confirmed at the resurrection, which is the beginning of a new creation, the rediscovery of all creation in God, of the final destiny of all creatures. And this destiny is expressed in the fact that God will be "all in all" (1Cor 15:28).

From the beginning Christ has been at the center of the faith and life of the Church, and also at the center of her teaching and theology. As for her teaching, it is necessary to go back to the entire first millennium, from the First Council of Nicaea to those of Ephesus and Chalcedon, and then finally to the Second Council of Nicaea, which evolved out of the Councils that preceded it. All of the Councils from the first millennium revolve around the Mystery of the Holy Trinity, including the procession of the Holy Spirit, but at their roots, all are Christological. From the time Peter confessed, "You are the Messiah the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16), Christ has been at the center of the faith and life of Christians, at the center of their witness, which often led to the shedding of their blood. Thanks to this faith and in spite of the persecutions, the Church experienced a continual expansion. The faith progressively Christianized the ancient world. Following the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi, true faith in Christ, God and man, did not cease to be the center of the Church's life, witness, worship, and liturgy, even when the threat of Arianism later emerged. It could be said that from the very beginning there was a Christological focus in Christianity. Above all, this is true of the faith and the living tradition of the Church. A remarkable expression of it is found in Marian devotion and in Mariology: "He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary" (Apostles' Creed). A Marian dimension and Mariology in the Church are simply another aspect of the Christological focus.

One must never tire of repeating this. Despite some common aspects, Christ does not resemble Muhammad or Socrates or Buddha. He is totally original and unique. The uniqueness of Christ, as indicated by Peter's words at Caesarea Philippi, is the center of the Church's faith, as expressed by the Creed:

"I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty."

This so-called Apostles' Creed is the expression of the faith of Peter and [not] of the whole Church. Then, beginning in the fourth century the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed entered into catechetical and liturgical use, enriching her teaching. It enriched that teaching thanks to the increased awareness which the Church gained as she progressively entered into Greek culture and more clearly realized the need for ways of presenting her doctrine which would be adequate and convincing in that cultural context.

At Nicaea and Constantinople it was affirmed that Jesus Christ was "the Only-begotten Son of God. Born of the Father before all ages begotten, nor made, of one being with the Father; by whom all things were made" (Nicene Creed).

These formulations are not simply the fruit of Greek culture; they come directly from the apostolic heritage. If we want to look for the source of these ideas, we will find it first of all in Paul and John.

Paul's Christology is extraordinarily rich. His starting point is an event that occurred at the gates of Damascus. The young Pharisee was blinded, but at the same time, with the eyes of his soul he saw the whole truth about the risen Christ. He then expressed this truth in his letters.

The words of the Nicene Creed are nothing other than the reflection of Paul's doctrine. These words also contain the heritage of John, particularly (but not only) in the Prologue of his Gospel (cf. Jn 1:1-18). His whole Gospel, as well as his Letters, are a witness to the Word of Life, to "what we have heard, / what we have seen with our own eyes, I ... and touched with our hands" (1Jn 1:1).

In a certain respect, John has greater qualifications as a witness than does Paul, even if Paul's testimony is so deeply moving. This comparison between Paul and John is important. John wrote after Paul. Therefore, it is above all in the writing of Paul that one must search for the first expressions of the faith.

And not only in Paul, but also in Luke, who was a follower of Paul. In fact, in Luke there is a passage that could be considered a bridge between Paul and John. I am referring to the words uttered by Christ and recorded by Luke—"he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit" (cf. Lk 10:21): "I give you praise, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him" (Lk 10:21-22). Here Luke expresses precisely what Matthew quotes Jesus as saying to Peter: "For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father" (Mt 16:17). There is an exact relationship between Luke's affirmation and John's words in his prologue: "No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him" (Jn 1:18).

This Gospel truth reappears many times in the writings of John. The Christology of the New Testament is "explosive." The Fathers, the great Scholastics, the theologians of the ensuing centuries did nothing other than return, always with renewed wonder, to the heritage they had received, in order to grow in a deeper understanding of it.

You will remember that my first encyclical on the Redeemer of man (*Redemptor Hominis*) appeared a few months after my election on October 16, 1978. This means that I was actually carrying its contents within me. I had only to "copy" from memory and experience what I had already been living on the threshold of the papacy.

I emphasize this because the encyclical represents a confirmation, on the one hand, of the tradition of the schools from which I came and, on the other hand, of the pastoral style, reflected in this encyclical. The Council proposed, especially in *Gaudium et Spes*, that the mystery of redemption should be seen in light of the great renewal of man and of all that is human. The encyclical aims to be a great hymn of joy for the fact that man has been redeemed through Christ—redeemed in spirit and in body. This redemption of the body subsequently found its own expression in the series of catecheses for the Wednesday Papal audiences: "Male and female he created them." Perhaps it would be better to say: "Male and female he redeemed them."