



Father
Ceslas Spicq, O.P.

*What
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owes to
His Mother*

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"God sent his Son, born of a woman" –

Gal. 4:4

It is as man, and not as God, that the Son of God, become man, exercises all the functions which faith teaches us that He undertook on our behalf. It is as man that Our Lord is King of the universe; it is as man that He is our redeemer; it is as man that He became priest and remains forever mediator between God and men (Heb. 1:1–4; Tim. 2:5).

Finally to use what is perhaps the most comprehensive and the most complete term, it is as man that He is our Head, source of all grace in the mystical body.

From this there flows the practical interest — for the living of our supernatural life, as well as for the love we bear Him — of having as precise an idea as possible of Christ's humanity. Since, however, there is no perfect knowledge, no real understanding of a thing, except in so

far as we know its causes, in so far as we explain it by its principles — *felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas* — we shall attempt to study the humanity of Jesus in its causes, in the factors which properly determine it, seeing what each one contributes.

The first factor which goes to constitute our Lord's humanity is the mystery, not of the Incarnation, for that comes later, but of the generation of the human being which was produced jointly by the Holy Ghost and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Instead of a human father and his spouse, as is normally had in the act of human generation, there are here two persons who share in the act, each quite extraordinary in his own way. It is, therefore, to be expected that the human being thus produced would Himself be exceptional, a person of very particular characteristics.

The first of the persons who participate in the act of the generation of Christ is the Holy

Ghost. Now this is only a manner of speaking. It is not the Holy Ghost as a person distinct from the other persons of the Holy Trinity; this idea does, though, have a foundation in reality. In all the divine operations *ad extra*, the three Divine Persons collaborate, not as distinct persons within the Trinity, but as constituting only one principle of action.

When God acts outside Himself, it is the three Persons who act, or to speak more accurately, it is God. It is the divine personality,

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which we consider prior to the distinction of the three persons. The individual persons act, with their really personal contribution, only within the Trinitarian life. To repeat once more, when He acts exteriorly God acts as one, single, formal principle; but we attribute, or better, we appropriate, certain operations of God to one person or another, according as we see apparent in these operations a reflection of the perfection or perfections which are the special title of honour, as it were, of that person.

Each time that God, acting exteriorly, produces a work in which the divine perfection we call love is particularly evident — a perfection which is strictly common to the three persons, but which we appropriate to the Holy Ghost — we likewise appropriate this work to the person of the Holy Ghost. When, therefore, we say that the Holy Ghost contributed to the conception of our Lord, it is only an appropriation. In fact, it is a work of God acting according to His divine

nature, and not according to the distinction of persons. It is a work of the divine nature attributed to the Holy Ghost because it is particularly a work of love, and love makes one think of the Holy Ghost. But neither the Father nor the Word must be excluded from this work.

We come now to the other person involved in this operation, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and here we have an equally singular person, since she had the unique prerogative of having been immaculate in her very conception. She who belongs to a fallen race, at enmity with God, had the privilege of being exempted from all sharing in original sin and its consequences. But that is only the negative side of her Immaculate Conception. This privilege included, as a positive good, sanctifying grace, a plenitude of sanctifying grace (not the plenitude which St. Thomas reserves for Christ). This had very important consequences.

There is another consideration to recall in order to understand clearly what sort of person the Blessed Virgin was and in what state she was when it came to sharing in the mystery of the birth of our Lord. Not only was she preserved from all participation in original sin (which can only be understood with and by the conferring of sanctifying grace, and that in full measure), but she also enjoyed another prerogative related to her own conception (no longer now on the plane of original sin or of the conferring of sanctifying grace) in the womb of her own mother, St. Anne.

From that time the Virgin Mary was surrounded by God with a very particular care. Her mother and father were born under the regime of original sin. The grace of God which sanctified them as it does us, sanctified them only by remedying to a limited extent the consequences of sin; like us, they knew concu-

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piscence, and remained subject to ignorance and sickness — *in iniquitatibus conceptus sum*. Joachim and Anne had been conceived with original sin, the consequences of which, in them as in us, were not completely repaired by grace. Following, as they did, a line of ancestors, some just and some sinners, they received from them a heredity which affected their bodies and, partly in consequence, their souls.

Now it was extremely important not only that their child Mary should be preserved from original sin and fixed in a state of justice, but that her body should be a perfect body. Born as she was in normal conditions, if she was to escape from the consequences of sin, in body as well as in soul, her body must be conceived under the

special guidance of the providence of God. And so the body of the Virgin Mary was perfect; it had all the perfection connatural to a human body.

The Blessed Virgin never harmed this perfection. She conducted her body so perfectly that she was in a state of complete integrity on the day, at the hour of the conception of her son Jesus. This, too, is very important: it was not only in order that she might have a saintly soul that God granted to Mary the privilege of the Immaculate Conception, but also that she might have a perfect body, she who was to be the mother of such a son. Men realize more clearly today that the role of the mother is the more important in the mystery of human generation. Science throws more and more light upon this fact. In the case at hand, this influence was even greater than normal since all the material elements that went to the forming of

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the body of Jesus came exclusively from His Mother: it was from the purest blood that Jesus' body was formed. On the other hand, instead of the paternal role there was God, He whose operations know no failure or mistake; by Him the work of fecundating and organizing was perfectly fulfilled.

We see then how the body of Our Lord was conceived under marvellous conditions, even bodily. It is the body in its integrity, absolutely perfect. The formation of the child Jesus in His Mother's womb did not progress slowly as in the normal process; it happened more quickly

(cf. S.T. Illa, q. 6, a. 4, ad 2um), and more perfectly, even though following exactly the same laws. We do not usually take this point of view, but it is of primary importance: the Blessed Virgin had to be perfect in her body since it was to supply all the matter from which the body of Jesus was formed.

But why was it absolutely necessary that Christ's body as a human body should be perfect? Why? Because that human body, or rather, that potential human body, would be united to a soul to form the "human composite," would be united to a soul so intimately that it would condition and measure, more than any other factor, its activity and performance, even intellectual.

God creates the soul at the moment that He unites it to the body which human generation has prepared (Cf. S.T. Illa, q. 6, a. 3). It is God, and He alone, who creates the soul in order to unite it to the body. Now all human souls, in-

cluding Our Lord's, are identical in nature and in their specific structure; for certain of their operations they do not depend on the body, so that as far as these operations are concerned they and the body are heterogeneous; but on the other hand, they have in them the principle of the sensitive and vegetative life — the life of the body they will inform. Seen from this point of view, all souls are equal. Any differences in souls considered as such must be specific differences. If Our Lord's soul was not in every way like to ours it would no longer be a human soul. But this particular soul will be united to this particular body and that is what individualizes it and makes it fundamentally different.

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At this stage it would be well to recall the unity of the human composite. The soul is not in the body as in a receptacle, like a sword in its sheath. Socrates and Plato considered the soul in the body like a pilot in a ship, a traveler in a hotel, a prisoner in jail. But no. Man is formed neither of body alone nor of soul alone, but constitutes a specific being which results from the substantial union of soul and body. Our bodies, flesh and blood that they are, are, says St. Thomas (Ia q. 75, a. 4), as much ours as our souls. I am my body just as much as I am my mind and my heart (a further reason for the necessity of a bodily resurrection).

Finally, for the human race the principle of individuation is not the soul (the form of the body), but matter, that is, the body. It is only because bodies are different that souls are different too. It is the body which fundamentally makes the difference between human individuals.

These differences come from the body since it is the body which individualizes the whole human being. It results from this that one person will be more intelligent than another because his intelligence is helped by a more refined constitution or one that is better adapted — those refined in body are better disposed in mind. Another will be more energetic because his spiritual will is served by an organism more favourable to it. Another has greater delicacy of sentiment because his sensibility is more varied or quicker to react. All our spiritual faculties are largely conditioned by the state of our vegetative and sensible life.

Granted that the soul is not absolutely and finally the prisoner of these conditions; the work of education and of virtue is precisely to bring about a liberation from this corporal domination, but we all know how laborious — and how limited — is this work of correcting and reforming the original, defective foundation.

Consequently, since all souls are equal, and since the quality of the body makes the difference in souls, we can see how vitally important it was that Our Lord's body should be perfect as a formed body, that is, one destined to be united with a soul.

But if Christ's body must be perfect, so must His Mother's. We can now see why. Not only must the Blessed Virgin be holy but nothing must come from her to her son which was not materially perfect. If a special providence of God had not watched over the bodily formation of the mother, it would have been necessary for the Holy Ghost on the day of the Incarnation to multiply miracles in order to preserve the organism of the child Jesus from the hereditary blemishes which His Mother would have involuntarily, but necessarily, transmitted to Him. But since Mary's body was perfect, Christ's was also.

Let us now apply these principles. Since, from the first moment of His existence, Our

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Lord had a body perfectly formed and in a state of complete integrity, it must be said that it was the only human body since Adam which existed in all its splendor. Our Lord was beautiful; physically He was wondrously beautiful, and this beauty He owed to His Mother. We are speaking here first of His intimate constitution (Cf. S.T. Illa, q. 46, a. 6). We know nothing definite about His exterior features, but there is no reason why His human appearance should have been in any way disturbed or vitiated. All the more so since Jesus did not inherit original

sin, for theologians teach that original sin is contracted by the mere fact of the union of the soul with a tainted body. But this sin of the nature affecting the person is transmitted by the father. Since Jesus had no human father, there was no need for Him to be exempted as his mother was. The question was not even posed for Him.

Let us remember that the Child Jesus was not an abstraction. He was His mother's son, and she was of a definite race, and of a definite class (Heb. 2:16). It is quite reasonable to imagine that this human body showed the characteristics of the Jewish type (not an abstract likeness), free of all blemish, of all imperfection, of anything that would be a defect and would come from the imperfections and the fortuitous qualities of the progenitors. Our Lord Jesus Christ was therefore of a particular human type, individually very marked. He resembled

His Mother, she who was the most beautiful of women, of Davidic, and therefore royal blood. Hence His nobility of stature and of bearing. He inspired immediate respect. In the Garden of Olives He advanced solemn and majestic, and all the soldiers, servants and valets, terrorized, tumbled over one another. And indeed, how could He have been less attractive than Solomon, the beloved son of David, for whom not only his people, but princesses and sovereigns, like Hiram, King of Tyre, and the Queen of Sheba, had a real passion?

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Free as He was from original sin and inheriting from his mother vigorous health, Our Lord could be tired from his labour: He fell asleep in the middle of the day in the boat, worn out from having preached so long; He sat down, literally "just as he was (*outos*)" at Jacob's well, on the ground, unable to go any further after having climbed the uplands of the Jordan all morning. But He was never ill; (Cf. S.T. Illa, q. 14, a. 4), He never had the flu, nor a cold, nor indeed any failure of his bodily resistance.

The eyes of Jesus — of Him who could withstand the look of any man — must have shone with a brilliance that was unbearable. They were His Mother's eyes, and they had a wise, experienced, celestial transparence that in no way detracted from their candour. Children's eyes have an almost vacant candour; those of Christ were rich in mystery. When they fixed themselves on a soul of good will, like the

rich young man, the look penetrated the very depths of the heart and stirred up the soul's love: "He looked on him and loved him."

The voice of Jesus must have possessed an extraordinary purity of timbre: a voice grave and low-pitched enough to pronounce the Hebrew gutturals, a level, resonant voice capable of speaking for hours during public discourses like the Sermon on the Mount. When, in the synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus read with emotion the text of Isaias referring to Himself, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," everyone, remarks St. Luke, was struck by the tone of voice and the personality of this perfect man, and they held their eyes riveted on Him.

It is difficult to describe adequately the ordinary bearing of Christ. What charm, what delicacy, what grace were in His slightest gestures! Even as a child, His grace, His harmoni-

ous beauty, was already striking, as St. Luke notes in a description gleaned from Mary; how extraordinary must this perfect proportion, this winningness, have appeared in the flower of His manhood! And what can we say of Jesus' smile, His Mother's smile, so spontaneous, so charming!

St. Paul sums up the life of the Saviour in one phrase: "The benignity of God has appeared on earth." This benignity, for the Apostle, is the smile of the Divine Charity, the visible sign of that gentle benevolence and tender mercy which fills the infinite heart of God. When Our Lord declares that He does only what He has heard and seen His Father do ("Who sees Me, sees My Father"), He indicates to us that His whole life has been a manifestation of the love which is in God.

We have only to look at Him, to listen to Him, to know what love is. For us the smile of a mother bending over her child is the very im-

age of love, and we know that the purpose of the Incarnation was to reveal to us the mystery of divine love in terms of human symbols.

I cannot help thinking that this revelation was realized first and foremost in the smile of Christ expressing such wondrous tenderness, such devoted attachment, and a giving of self so completely, that words become inadequate and only the symbol of that smile of benignity can suggest it. And we know that it was the Virgin Most Pure who gave her son those features, that look, those lips. The risen Christ has kept them all, more luminous than ever, and it is this we shall first contemplate on arriving in paradise.

Christ was not only physically perfect; He was psychically perfect as well. At a time when there is endless talk of complexes, disequilibrium, neurasthena, cyclothymia, and other nervous disorders, we can appreciate all the more the marvellous balance of Christ. A strong and

healthy nervous system gave Him complete mastery over His body before the explosions of hate of the Sanhedrin or before the tribunal of Pilate; dying in agony, He could still think of His Mother more than of Himself, and not wishing to leave her alone, He confided her to St. John.

Every child receives from his mother his sensibility, his delicacy of heart, his emotional capacity. It was from the Blessed Virgin that Jesus inherited His faculty of compassion which was in evidence His whole life long. He, who, racked by hunger after forty days of fasting, refuses to work a miracle to obtain bread, cannot resist the pity which wells up in Himself at the sight of the crowd which follows Him like sheep without a shepherd, and He multiplies bread and fish to feed them; for, explain the evangelists, "He had pity on the multitude." When He enters the little village of Naim, He meets a widow whom He did not know; but it

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is a widow who has just lost her son, and it is her only son. The Lord, seeing her, is moved to the very depths, writes St. Luke. At the sight of such grief, He is overcome and cries: "O woman! Weep not!" He restores the dead man to life and "gives him to his mother" (Luke 7:13). In the same way, arriving at Bethany after the death of Lazarus, He sees Mary, Lazarus' sister, all in tears and broken with sorrow.

St. John, who accompanied Him, notes that "he groaned in anguish." We know that Jesus

wept over his country's capital: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, (...) how often would I have gathered thy children together as a hen gathers her young under her wings" (Matt. 23:37).

St. Mark, the observant, remarks that the breast of the Master heaved with compassion before the deaf-mute: Looking up to heaven, He sighed, and said to him, "Ephpheta," that is, "Be thou opened" (Mark 7:34).

It is precisely because the son of the Virgin Mary was so exquisitely sensitive that He felt all the trials He suffered far more acutely than we ever could. First of all, there was the constant anguish at the thought of the sufferings He was going to endure. He Himself, normally so reticent about His personal feelings, could not prevent Himself from opening His heart to the Twelve: "But I have a baptism to be baptized with and how distressed I am until it is accomplished" (Luke 12:50).

He confesses on Holy Thursday: "Now my soul is troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save Me from this hour! No, this is why I come to this hour. Father, glorify Thy name (John 12:27). His anguish grows as His hour draws near. "When Jesus," observes John, "had said these things, He was troubled in spirit, and said solemnly, 'Amen, amen, I say to you, one of you will betray Me" (John 13:21). In Gethsemane, He can go no further: "My soul is sad even unto death," (Matt. 26:38), and He crumples to the ground; a bloody sweat bursts from all over His body and bedews the earth. An angel from heaven must needs comfort Him physically so that He can continue the struggle.

It is with all this in mind that the Epistle to the Hebrews will cry out: "Therefore because children have blood and flesh in common, so He in like manner has shared in these (...). He would deliver them, who throughout their lives were kept in servitude by the fear of death... For in

that He himself has suffered and has been tempted, He is able to help those who are tempted (Hebrews 2:14–18). "For we have not a high priest who cannot have compassion on our infirmities, but one tried as we are in all things except sin" (Hebrews 4–15). "He is able to have compassion on the ignorant and erring, because He himself also is beset with weakness" (Hebrews 5:2).

And yet in practice He forgets His own sorrow, and turns His attention to the pain of His disciples. When they are overwhelmed at the thought of separation, He reassures them: "Do not let your heart be troubled, or be afraid" (John 14:27). The whole discourse after the Last Supper has as its end to comfort the apostles, to assure them of His affection and His continued presence. Risen, He wants them to share His joy; indeed, His first words to Mary Magdalen are: "Woman, why art thou weeping?" (John 20:15), and to the disciples of Emmaus: "What words are these that you are exchanging as you walk

and are sad?" (Luke 24:17). Having endured His passion and death, Our Lord knows the human heart's capacity for suffering, and He co-suffers with every man, using His omnipotence to bring to each one serenity and confidence.

Perhaps it is here that we best understand what Christ owes to His Mother: an inflexible strength of will and a sovereign freedom. Every man is filled with good will and loves the good and the ideal; but so often are aspirations choked by our passions, by uncontrolled movements of our nature. This man, who loves his neighbour, is of a choleric disposition and cannot master the surges of impatience and anger against his

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brethren. Another, sincerely desirous of serving God, has a phlegmatic temperament which stifles his efforts at self-sacrifice; yet another, gifted with a pure heart, is the prey of fear and cannot resist the pressure of suffering.

But Our Lord received from His Mother a perfect body, free of all defect. What He willed, He accomplished without obstacle, with an unshakeable resolution. Never was any man blessed with such a strong, heroic will. It dominated, without wavering, all the tortures of Calvary. With what calmness, what self-mastery did He declare: "... He (the prince of the world) comes that the world may know that I love the Father, and that I do as the Father has commanded Me" (John 14:31). He meant by those words that He adhered to the divine plans lovingly and unreservedly, and that there was never any hesitation or incertitude in His liberty of action. Few men are

completely free; nearly always they are determined to some degree by heredity; the body is a drag on their most enthusiastic impulses, and these chains are daily tightened by their personal sins. Human liberty is literally a liberation, a progressive escape from these constraints, whether innate or culpably acquired. Only the saints attain this liberty, and then only in a restricted sense, for they too bemoan their deficiencies "I do not understand what I do," cries St. Paul, "for it is not what I wish that I do, but what I hate that I do... Unhappy

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man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:15–24).

But Jesus received from His Mother a perfect body, and from His conception enjoyed an absolute liberty in which His soul was completely master of all His being. Whatever He thought or willed was never opposed by egoism or some disordered passion, still less by external pressures. More than anyone else, He was supremely independent of men and things; yet He was far from being sectarian or anti-social, for He maintained cordial relations with individuals from the most disparate groups. He mingled socially as much with the pious Pharisees as with the publicans who collected taxes for the detested foreign government (Luke 7:36; 14:1; 19:1–10). He recruited one of His apostles from the Zealot party, while another, one of the most fervent, came from the immediate milieu of the High Priest (Luke 6:15;

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Matt. 10:4; Mark 3:18; John 18:15). He was even happy to make the acquaintance of the Roman officer who accosted Him (Matt. 8:5–13; 7:1–10).

However, He cared little for the scandal caused by His choice of the greater part of His disciples from the simple folk (Matt. 11:19; Luke 15:1–2), even though it excited the suspicion of the Pharisees. He offended them by His denunciation of their soul-less, legalistic religious observances; He assumed a moral author-

ity which shocked the religious chiefs (Mark 1:21–22; 2:7); He provoked the sacerdotal aristocracy by chasing the buyers and sellers who had made of the temple a market and bank; and He alienated the rebel faction in recognizing the right of the emperor to demand tribute of his subjects.

It remains now to consider the intelligence of Christ. There is, of course, no need to prove that Christ was intelligent. The more one meditates on the Gospels, the more one is forced to admire the aptness, the subtlety, and the depth of Jesus' replies to His adversaries. They conspired to set the most cunning traps for Him: alone, and without any reflection, He found the perfect retort (e.g., "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's...") His doctrine was accessible to the ordinary people, and yet the learned have not been able to exhaust the wealth of its treasures.

Jesus was the greatest genius who ever lived, and this He owed to the Blessed Virgin Mary; for, let us repeat it for the last time, His human soul was exactly the same as ours. It is only because it was united to a perfect body that it had a value which ours has not. It is with difficulty that our intellect succeeds in penetrating the foggy world which our inert, opaque sensibility constructs, — and I am not speaking of the wound of ignorance which

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original sin has bequeathed to us. But Jesus, possessing extraordinary powers of intuition and reasoning, discovered immediately all the truth that is hidden under phenomena, and His acquired knowledge developed with unbelievable rapidity. (Cf. S.T. Illa, q. 9, a. 1, 4; q. 12, a. 1, 2).

While He was still a child, all were amazed at the progress of His knowledge. "And Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and grace before... God and men" (Luke 2:52). Since He was never taught by the rabbis, it was from His Mother that He learned the rudiments of human knowledge and especially of the knowledge of God; and Mary had such a profound sense of the Divine Mysteries!

In the Magnificat she sang the beatitude of the poor that her son would promulgate in the Sermon on the Mount. His powers of assimilation and understanding were such that at the

age of twelve the doctors of Israel were stupefied, literally "beside themselves," at His knowledge by his personal discoveries, by inference, comparison and contrast, all with marvellous facility. Discovering some new and unexpected fact, He reacted with spontaneous admiration and joy: "Believe me, I have not found faith like this, even in Israel" (Matt. 8:10). Is this not the psychology of His Mother's song of astonishment at the generous goodness of God toward her?

There was a time when unbelieving critics proclaimed that Jesus was a man whom faith had divinized; today they would like to consider Him a God progressively humanized, whose name and cult is being more and more surrounded by concrete, historical pseudo-events. But it comes rather as a shock to read these lines of Blessed Angela de Foligno: "Ah! Do not speak any more of the Gospel, nor of the life of Jesus Christ, nor of any divine word.

To me all that would mean nothing any more. I see in God greater grandeurs." Even St. Teresa of Avila was tempted to follow this dangerous path: "Some people advise strongly to leave aside all human images and to elevate oneself to the pure contemplation of the divinity; and they look on everything which falls under the senses, including the humanity of Jesus Christ, as an encumbrance or an obstacle."... O Lord of my soul, Jesus crucified, never can I recall the time I followed this opinion without sorrow, for therein I see myself guilty of base treachery."

It is by Christ's humanity that we are saved, and that we attain God. It is this human nature that we have considered in itself, abstracting temporarily from its properly supernatural gifts, from sanctifying grace, infused knowledge, the beatific vision. The humanity of Jesus precisely as a human nature, was extraordinary, but this is explained by the fact that He had it from an

extraordinary mother. We may conclude then with two acclamations of faith, coming from two women in the Gospel. Elizabeth, receiving the Blessed Virgin Mary, greets her by praising her Son: "Blessed is the fruit of thy womb." In the midst of the crowd, a woman raises her voice and cries out, "Blessed is the womb that bore thee, and the breasts that nursed thee." That anonymous woman was an excellent theologian. (Luke 1:42; 11:27).

In this book Fr. Ceslas Spicq examines the part played by the Blessed Virgin Mary in the life of Our Lord from her fiat to his death on the Cross, including His being born of her flesh and being instructed by her as a child.



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