

LESSON 10: Revelation and Scripture



FOCUS	Revelation: Bible (Scripture; Word of God – inspiration, interpretation)
REFERENCE	<i>The Christian Story</i> (Chapter 2, p.4-11)
GLOSSARY	Revelation, Scripture, Bible, Testament, Tanak, Yahweh, Covenant, Israel, Inspiration, Sacrament, Canon, Tradition, Assumption, Apostolic, Incarnation, Reign of God

TEACHER'S NOTES

1. The reading material for this and the following lessons in Theology are taken from *The Christian Story* (2007) Cluster Publications. The extracts are given below on a separate Lesson Materials page for easy reproduction.
2. Key terms that appear in these extracts are explained in the glossary of the same text and are also given on the Lesson Materials page.

This chapter of the book contains a wealth of new concepts relating to revelation and scripture. It would not be wise to try to cover it in a single session. Here, we divide it into two parts.

LESSON SUGGESTIONS

PART ONE [📖 ⇨ ⇨]

📖 Text

Have the whole chapter read by the students to get an overall impression. This could be done as a homework assignment or at the beginning of the lesson.

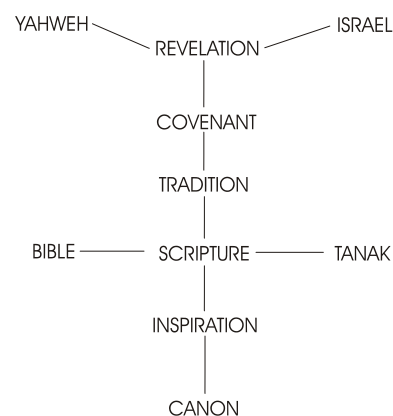
⇨ Discussion

Introduce the students to the glossary that is contained at the end of the book (p 151). Make sure they know how it works. (See the middle of page x of the Foreword.)

⇨ Exercise

Divide the class into four (or eight) groups. Groups do the following exercise:

- (a) They study the following ten glossary entries: Revelation, Scripture, Bible, Tanak, Yahweh, Covenant, Israel, Inspiration, canon, Tradition.
- (b) They now make a mind map of the ten, showing how they relate to each other.



The illustration alongside suggests what such a map might look like. Yahweh reveals himself to Israel and invites them into a covenant relationship. The tradition is the story of this relationship which is eventually written down in scripture. Collections of writing that are regarded as inspired are called canons. Christians call their canon the Bible; Jews call theirs the Tanak.

PART TWO [📖 ⇨⇨]

📖 Text

Allocate sections of the chapter to the four (or eight) groups as follows:

- GROUP 1 (5) The whole Bible tells a single story & The key to the whole story is Jesus, the Wisdom and the Word of God in person
- GROUP 2 (6) The Bible is inspired literature
- GROUP 3 (7) The books of the Bible were written in another time and another culture
- GROUP 4 (8) The Bible originates within the Church

⇨ Exercise

Students read and discuss their allocated section(s) and negotiate a summary for presentation to the class. Encourage them to have some visual material to assist in their presentations.

⇨ Presentation

Student groups present their summaries. Allow questions for clarification and some guided discussion so that the students have a good grasp of the concepts met in this lesson.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Where do you experience God?
- Do you think fundamentalism in the interpretation of the Bible and the teachings of the Church is a problem in the Church today? What, in your opinion, is the most effective way to deal with such fundamentalists?
- In what sense is it true to say that revelation is closed? In what sense is it true to say that revelation is a continuing reality?
- Would you call the gospels biographies of Jesus?
- Can you think of any traditions (lowercase t) which some Catholics confuse with Tradition (uppercase T)?

Lesson Materials



Revelation and Scripture

✎ God seeks us out

Our questions about life do not begin with us. They are planted in the depths of our being by the God who creates us and seeks us out from the very beginning. God is forever involved in self-communication. God's desire – that we come to know ourselves and our maker in the fullness of life – is expressed in this self-unveiling which we call **revelation**.

Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea, question the beauty of the air distending and diffusing itself, question the beauty of the sky... question all these realities. All respond: "See, we are beautiful." ... Who made them if not the Beautiful One?

Revelation is not knowledge of another world: rather it opens our eyes to the interior depth of what is already there. It is knowledge that comes from beyond the limit or boundary of our own experience. God is revealed in the nature of the Universe, in the wisdom of human cultures and religions, and in human history, giving all these things their deepest meaning. Eventually, this knowledge, this experience and understanding is given expression in writings called **scripture**, which are validated by the faith community out of which they come. For the Christian, all these ways of revealing are summed up in Jesus Christ, "through whom all things came into being" (John 1:3).

The Christian scriptures are a collection of sacred or inspired writings called the **Bible**. And that is where we next turn to look. What sort of book is the Bible, and how can we make sense of it?

✎ The whole Bible tells a single story

The Christian Bible consists of two parts, the Hebrew scriptures, or **Tanak**, and the Christian scriptures called the **New Testament**. Together they form a single story of how God is intimately involved with human history. The Bible records what Augustine Shutte terms "a breakthrough in the history of thought, an insight into history itself that was so illuminating that it changed the course of history and has made the world what it is today". This breakthrough was the inspired recognition of **Yahweh**, the only God, Creator of all that is, alive and at work, guiding the Universe to its fulfilment.

Christians have traditionally referred to the Hebrew scriptures as the Old Testament. This way of naming them carries the danger of thinking that this Testament is obsolete. The Testament is a record of God's **covenant** with Israel, and God never goes back on a word once uttered. The Testament is therefore eternal.

What we see in the Hebrew or Jewish scriptures is the story of how God (Yahweh) formed a community, **Israel**. Their story was of a people committed to living in such a way that the promises of God would become believable to others. They were bound to God by a

covenant, understood in those days as an agreement saying, “I’ll do this, if you do that”. However, God’s covenant is unconditional. God says, “I am going to do this – for example, make you my people – therefore you must do that.” Israel often failed to live up to its side of the agreement, but God always stays faithful and keeps inviting a renewal of the covenant. Gradually, the covenant that evolved through Jewish history became, for Christians, the New Covenant of Jesus. Christians today can look back at the Hebrews of the Exodus and the Exile and see a continuity in their story.

The connection between the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is not that the Hebrew prophets foretold the future and then in the New Testament it happened. Rather, the prophets saw the bigger pattern into which their times fitted – the pattern of God’s unfolding, creative plan. When Jesus’ life made that pattern clear to the New Testament writers, what the prophets had seen fell into place.

The Bible is inspired literature

The Bible is literally a library of Jewish and Christian books, all collected in a single cover. Other religious traditions also have their scriptures: the *Qur’an*, for example, is the holy book of Islam, and Hindu sacred stories are told in the *Mahabharata* and other books.

When we say the Bible is inspired, we don’t mean that God dictated it to passive human secretaries, or simply dropped it from heaven; nor do we mean that the Bible is the only inspired piece of art through which God speaks to human beings. The *inspiration* of the Bible means this:

- ❖ The Holy Spirit guided the writing and putting together of the Bible, in such a way that it contains what we need for our sure guidance.

Since all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture, firmly faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confined to the sacred Scriptures.

While the Bible is an authoritative testimony to God’s revelation, it is nevertheless a human testimony, and subject to fallibility in the offering of that testimony. We might sum this up by saying that the Bible is the Word of God in human language.

- ❖ Christians recognise the Bible as the *sacrament* of the Word of God. When the Bible is proclaimed, the Word is truly present, communicating what is important for them to know and understand. When the Word is heard in the depth of a person’s heart, then it brings about what it points to. The Bible, however, as a human discourse, does not necessarily reveal truth to any and every reader. Jesus, after all, spoke to many who did not, and could not, hear him because their hearts were closed. As Jesus says, “The Spirit blows where it pleases” (John 3:8) and it is the action of the Spirit that creates the encounter we call revelation.
- ❖ The Bible, as a whole, is seen by Christians as a guaranteed touchstone of truth – something against which the truth of other things can be confidently tested. We could say that it acts as an anchor that prevents one drifting off from the truth. However, we need to understand the sense of truth that the Bible conveys, and also appreciate that

it does not deal with moral questions that have arisen for the first time in the modern world.

The books of the Bible were written in another time and another culture

To understand the significance of this, and to avoid becoming burdened with many false and unhelpful ideas when we read Scripture, we need to remember these things:

- ❖ The various books of the Bible were written in Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek, and not in English or Zulu, or any other language that we speak today. Since meaning can be lost or obscured in translation, we must be open to the light that scripture scholars can shed on the meaning of the original writings.
- ❖ The Bible wasn't written in our time or from within our culture. The background of concepts, ideas, customs, writing-styles, and so on, is sometimes very different from our own, and unless we understand this we can miss the meaning the author intended. We therefore need to take this into account in any interpretation.

Seeing that, in sacred Scripture, God speaks through persons in human fashion, it follows that the interpreter of sacred Scriptures, in order to ascertain what God had wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of their words.

Think, for instance, of what colour filters do to our vision. The world looks very different when we see it in red, or green, or blue light only. In the same way, the Word of God takes on a different colour depending on the culture through which it is being expressed.

Once scripture scholars have removed the cultural filters and grasped the intended meaning, another challenge presents itself to them. How do they express this meaning in language and concepts that are intelligible today? This is important if the Bible is to speak to us today and not simply show us what some ancient people thought.

- ❖ The Bible wasn't all written at one time. There is a moral progression in it, and we must read the morals of the Hebrew scriptures in the framework of their times. Neither was the Bible written with today's moral dilemmas in mind, nor with the clearer light that the Church enjoys after a two-thousand year apprenticeship to the Spirit. Slavery, for instance, is seen as accepted practice in some New Testament writings, whereas today we condemn it outright. Augustine's key for interpreting the scriptures was the revelation that 'God is love' (1John 4:8). Any text contrary to this, or in tension with it, is to be subordinated or brought in line.
- ❖ The Bible should be read with an awareness of context. Not every little quotation, torn out of its place, will convey truth. The message of such a fragment needs to be seen within the whole of the Bible's message.
- ❖ The Bible wasn't written by newspaper reporters and television crews with shorthand pads, tape recorders, and video cameras. What actually happened in most cases was that things were passed on for years by word of mouth. This is called oral tradition, and

most of us know stories (like legends) that came to us that way. By being told over and over, these things became set, and eventually they came to be written down. This suggests that the details of the story are not as important as the reality they communicate. Call to mind, for instance, the factual discrepancies we find in reading the various gospel post-resurrection narratives.

The Bible originates within the Church

The Bible can only be properly interpreted within the larger context of the Church. Consider the following:

- ❖ The New Testament was written *within* the Church and for the Church's needs. The writers weren't conscious that they were writing sacred scripture. It was the Church that recognised these writings, together with the Hebrew scriptures, as **canon** – that is, assuredly the Word of God. For many years before they were recognised, and even before they were written down at all, the Church existed without a New Testament. Similarly, what Jewish people call the *Tanak* was written and recognised over the centuries within the Hebrew/Jewish community out of which the Church grew.
- ❖ It is only *within* the Church, therefore, that we can interpret the Bible with sureness. The Spirit who inspired the writing of the Bible within the Church also guides the reading and interpretation of it within the Church. Of course, this doesn't mean that we can't ponder on Scripture on our own or in informal groups. In fact, it's very important for all Christians to reflect on Scripture, and it is very valuable to do this alone and in groups. Fresh insights into Scripture can enrich the Church's ongoing understanding. However the basic interpretation that has developed in the whole Church over its 2000 years of reflection commands respect, and members of the Church trust this more than contradictory private interpretations.
- ❖ But knowledge of God doesn't come simply from the Bible. It comes from the Church's *whole* memory and continuing experience of God's revelation in the way it is understood and responded to. We call this the **Tradition**. Tradition is the process which transmits or hands on the mystery of God's self-communication in created things and events of history. We can view the Bible as the *written* part of this Tradition. But Christianity is not a religion of the book: tradition is much larger than the written word.

Notice, for example, that the Church has handed down a belief in Mary's **Assumption** since apostolic times, although the Bible carries no story of it.

- ❖ There are also traditions or customs in the Church that are not apostolic. Their presence or absence does not affect the wholeness of revelation in any way. An illustration of this is the fourteen Stations of the Cross which line the walls of most Catholic churches and chapels. This feature was unknown for the first thousand years or so of the Church's history. It was introduced by the followers of St Francis as an aid to reflection on, and symbolic participation in, Jesus' journey to Calvary. Some of the stations depict events that are not recorded in Scripture, such as the meeting of Jesus with his mother, or the wiping of Jesus' face by Veronica. Unlike the Church's belief in Mary's Assumption, they are not part of the apostolic tradition. They may or may not be objectively true.

- ❖ Tradition is not static: it makes progress in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on. In the small acorn, is the whole reality of the mighty oak. In the same way, God's revelation in Jesus is complete, and yet it needs to unfold through the centuries of human history in order for it to be seen in all its glory. So, the Church is always advancing towards the fullness of divine truth

The Church, as the People of God, is aware that it is helped by the Holy Spirit in its understanding and interpretation of Scripture. The first disciples of Jesus knew that they did not have the capacity right away to understand the full reality of what they had received in all its aspects. As they persevered in their life as a community, they experienced an ever-deepening and progressive clarification of the revelation they had received.

In addition, just as Scripture needs to be constantly reinterpreted in different times and cultures, so too, the Tradition needs to be ever open to new expression, or else it runs the risk of losing its meaning.

✂ The key to the whole story is Jesus, the Wisdom and the Word of God in person

In the Hebrew scriptures, there is a basic story. It's told and re-told in many different sets of circumstances and with many different sets of characters. The common features in all the versions of the story are:

- ❖ that the Hebrew people RECOGNISED, looking back, that God played a role in their story;
- ❖ and that God always played the same RECOGNISABLE kind of role in their story.

In the New Testament, the familiar story becomes a human person. In other words, the story of God-with-us, *Emmanuel*, becomes recognisable in the person of Jesus. That's what we mean by the ***Incarnation***: the story becoming flesh.

Just as the Bible is the Word of God in human language, so Jesus is the Word of God in the language of human life. All that God wanted to say to human beings, God said in the person of Jesus who is, Christians believe, the definitive self-revelation of God. Whatever God communicated in the Hebrew scriptures – that is, before Jesus – was a preparation for us to understand him. It's a bit like learning French before visiting Paris: the French lessons are a preparation for the experience of getting to Paris and actually understanding the language. The Hebrew scriptures are nonetheless the Word of God, and it is the same Word which became flesh in the man we know as Jesus. He is present in the Hebrew scriptures just as a song is already present when written on a piece of paper, before it has ever been sung.

In Jesus, God allows men, women and children to see and hear and touch and know the being of God in their own way, in their own humanity. Jesus reveals what human life can be, and shall be, under the ***Reign of God***. Jesus is the Word that everyone, with the right disposition, can understand, and in understanding it, they are filled with a new Spirit.

Before Jesus, God's intentions were not very evident. It was as if one had to read the Word in the dim, but growing light before the dawn. But when Jesus came, the picture was clear to see. Jesus is the key to understanding the whole story that the Bible tells – the story of how God's plan has unfolded. Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One, chosen by God as the 'cornerstone' of the 'new heaven and new earth' (Ephesians 2:20; Revelation 21:1). When Jesus died, the cornerstone was laid: when Jesus rose, the beginnings of the new building became visible. This new building is the Universe, the home of all beings, brought to its full potential in the life of God.

Jesus is also the key to each individual human life. Certainly, for the disciples who walked and talked with Jesus, there could be nothing 'after' him, because he took them to life's limits. When Christians read the Bible, they are challenged to recognise themselves in the stories there; and to recognise God's role in their own story.

Apostolic

When we describe the Church as apostolic, we mean that the Church is faithful to its roots: it can trace, through its mission, its teaching, and its bishops a continuous succession from the Twelve Apostles that Jesus chose.

Assumption

Belief in the *Assumption* of Mary grew from earliest times until it was solemnly defined by Pope Pius XII in 1950 as a revealed truth or dogma of the Christian faith, even though it is not specifically mentioned in Scripture. The definition was worded in these terms: "Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory." What does this mean? Just as in the case of the Ascension of Jesus, human language is incapable of expressing clearly a reality beyond space and time. What the belief affirms is that Mary has entered completely into the glorified life that Jesus enjoys. She lacks nothing of the fullness of existence that God intends for human beings.

Bible

The Bible, after the Greek word *biblia* meaning books, is the library of scriptures or sacred writings that Christians hold to be inspired and thus the Word of God. It normally comes as a single book, containing two main sections – the Hebrew Scriptures (called the Old Testament by Christians) and the Christian Scriptures, called the New Testament.

Canon

The word 'canon' means 'measuring rod' or 'rule'. Thus, the canon of Scripture is the collection of books that are acknowledged by the Church to be the authoritative, inspired Word of God, and hence can be used to 'measure' the Church's faith.

Covenant

A covenant in early Hebrew society was a solemn ritual agreement between two parties who were not necessarily equals. The covenant served the function of a written agreement. Written documents were not much in use in those days, and so the spoken word was invested with ritual solemnity to give it a kind of concrete reality. The word 'covenant' means 'a coming together'.

Incarnation

The Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, is the eternal self-expression of the Father, the Creator of the Universe. When the Father expresses the totality of the Divine Self in Creation, the result is the human being, known to history as Jesus Christ. The Incarnation of the Word of God, the Word made flesh (Latin, *caro*) means that God is tangibly present and visible within Creation. It illustrates the closeness of God to Creation, and to human beings in particular.

Inspiration

In the second creation account of Genesis, God shaped the human from the soil of the Earth and blew the breath of life into his nostrils. From the beginning, therefore, we human beings have enjoyed the inspiration of God. In the depths of our beings we share God's life. This does not mean that we neither err nor sin, but being in God ensures that our journey ends in the fullness of life. Just so with the inspired Scriptures. Even though they are not free from error due to human limitations, they were breathed into being by the Spirit, and that breath of life is communicated when the Scriptures are read or proclaimed. Inspired writing is not confined to the canon of Scripture. But, as far as the canon is concerned the Church is sure. It is like that with saints: there are those who are canonised, and there are many more not officially recognised or known by the Church.

Israel

Israel is the name of a people in the Hebrew Scriptures that is identified with the patriarch Jacob. The name implies struggle. God struggles with humankind to enter into a relationship so that human beings will know who God is. In their turn, human beings struggle to enter into relationship with God and so become who they really are. (See Genesis 32:23-32.)

Reign of God

The manifestation and growth of the Kingdom of God is at the centre of Jesus' teaching and ministry. The idea was not invented by Jesus: its roots lie deep within biblical history and the Hebrew Scriptures. But, in the person of Jesus, people experience beyond doubt, and in full clarity, what it means and what it requires of those who would embrace it. Jesus proclaimed: "The kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15) Living in the kingdom of God means experiencing life beyond the limits of the world we know, where "God is all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28), and all things are in harmony with their Creator's wisdom and love.

Revelation

Revelation is God's self-communication with humankind, and consists in powerful, attractive experiences that stand at the base of a religious tradition. Revelation is, in the first place, therefore, an experience of the Divine. The expression of this revelation in concepts and writings (scripture) is an attempt to capture the experience for future generations.

Sacrament

The idea of 'sacrament' is central to Christian theology. Sacraments are symbols, and symbols are visible things that reveal something about an invisible reality. Furthermore they make that invisible reality present. Thus Jesus is the original symbol of God, because as a visible person he reveals experientially the invisible God. Closer to our experience, a kiss may be seen as sacramental since it is a visible token of love which is invisible, and, in addition, makes that very love present to the receiver.

Scripture

Scripture is that body of writing that has been accepted by the Christian community as being the authentic witness to, and interpretation of, Christianity's foundational revelation. (Robert Sheard)

Tanak

Tanak is the Hebrew name for the sacred writings which Christians call the Old Testament. The word is formed by placing together the first letters of the Hebrew names for the three sections which make up these writings – the Law (Torah), the Prophets (Nebiim), and the Writings (Kethubim).

Testament

A will or testament is a document by which a person regulates the rights of others over his or her property or family after death. Such a document serves as a witness to the person's will in this respect. The Hebrew and Christian scriptures are called testaments because they reveal God's will or purposes towards humankind.

Tradition

Tradition is that which is transmitted or handed down in a community from generation to generation. Tradition serves as a memory of the past, enshrining as it does the values whence that community draws its

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strength and sense of identity. But tradition is a living thing, and part of the task handed down is to allow the tradition to grow through internal self-reflection and through external dialogue with others.

Yahweh

The Hebrew word for 'divine being' is El. This is reflected in the very name 'Isra-el', or 'one who struggled with God'. Yahweh (or YHWH, since there are no vowels in Hebrew) is the sacred name that identifies the God of Israel in the Hebrew scriptures. The name, meaning "I am who am" or "He who is", was revealed at the burning bush when Moses asked God for a name so that he could tell the people who it was that had sent him. Because of a sense of reverence for this name, it was replaced in reading by the word 'Adonai' or 'Lord', and this is why English translations sound rather awkward in verses such as "The Lord said to my Lord..." (Psalm 110:1), where the first 'Lord' refers to God, and the second to the king. Some English Bibles use the word Jehovah which is a combination of JHWH with the vowels of the word 'Adonai'.

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LESSON 11: Creation



FOCUS	Creation (Creatures; evolution)
REFERENCE	<i>The Christian Story</i> (Chapter 3, p.12-22)
GLOSSARY	Cosmology, Big Bang, Evolution, Animals, Dualism, Resurrection, Grace, Angels, Agape

NOTE

It will not be possible to deal with whole chapter in a single session. Hence, as with the previous lesson, it is divided into two parts.

LESSON SUGGESTIONS

PART ONE [⇒ 📖 ⇒ ⇒ 📖 ⇒]

⇒ Reflection

Open the lesson with a short visual presentation that will raise a sense of wonder at creation. One useful resource of this nature is the Hubble Space Telescope Advent Calendar which can be found at:

http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/2008/12/hubble_space_telescope_advent.html

📖 Text

Read the sections “Creation is from God” and “The creation accounts of Science and Religion can be reconciled.”

⇒ Presentation

Present the *Time Tape* that can be found at the end of this lesson. Some discussion may arise out of this before you move on.

⇒ Reflection

Read or display on a poster the following words of Albert Einstein:

A human being is part of a whole, called by us the "Universe", a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelingly as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. (Albert Einstein - quoted in Sogyal Rinpoche's The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, p 98)

📖 Text

Read the sections “Creatures are both visible and invisible”, “Human beings are an integral part of creation”, “Human beings, men and women, are made in the image of God” and “There may be other conscious beings we are not aware of.”

⇒ Discussion-Reflection

Allow time for discussion of issues or questions that may have arisen out of the readings.

PART TWO [⇒ 📖 ⇒ 📖 ⇒]

⇒ **Reflection**

Open this second part with a reading or dramatization of the creation account [Genesis 1:1 – 2:4]

📖 **Text**

Read the following sections: “Everything that God creates is good”, “Creation is a sacrament of God’s Presence” and “The Creator is a loving God.”

⇒ **Discussion**

Display and discuss the cartoon below.



📖 **Text**

Now read the last section of the chapter: “The existence of evil and suffering does not limit the goodness of God.”

⇒ **Expression**

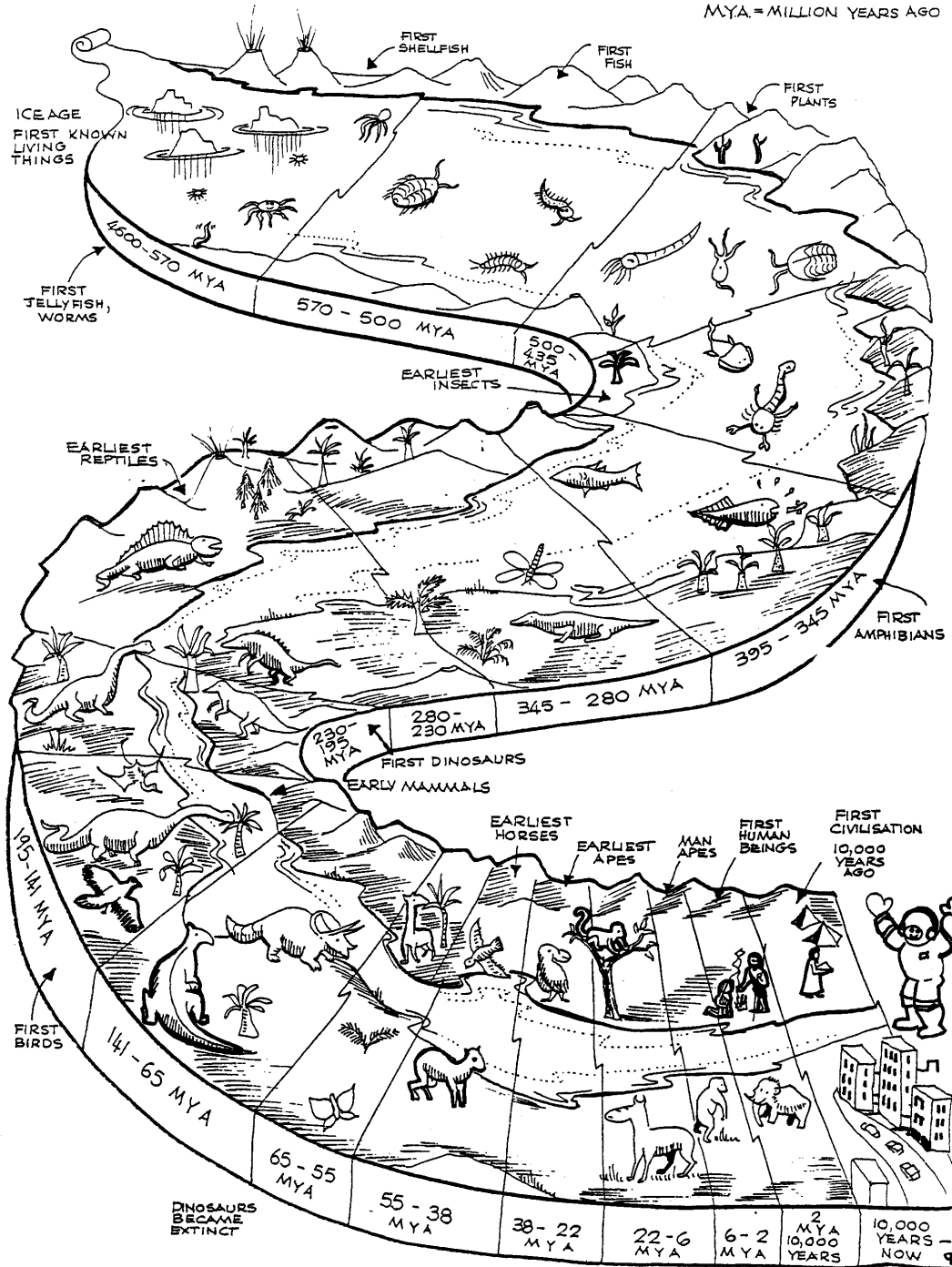
As a way of summing up, invite the learners to rewrite Psalm 148 in their own words, expressing their understanding of and appreciation for creation.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- If it is difficult to reconcile evil with a merciful God, would it be any easier to explain heroic charity if there were no God?
- Think about your images of God through your life. Who was/is God for you as a child? Today? Can you think of an event which led to a change in your image?
- How do you explain the current fascination with angels and evil spirits in a world so scientifically and technologically advanced as ours?
- Does the ‘web of life’ image speak to you? If yes, in what ways? If no, can you suggest another image for the interconnection of all life?

TIME TAPE.

MYA = MILLION YEARS AGO



Lesson Materials



Creation

✂ Creation is from God

Creation means: where nothing is, God brings something into existence, something that comes from God and yet is not God. Creation is not from any matter that already exists, unlike a human artist's creation which involves making something out of something else. Yet it is misleading to say that Creation is 'from nothing' because it is from God.

Creation is seen in the Christian story as the unfolding of God's desire. The words of Genesis, "Let there be", were just the beginning. Creatures were given, in their being, the power to become something more. Creation continues; the Universe is evolving. As Scripture says: 'God is working still' (John 5:17). Indeed, each of us is a continuation of God's creative activity!

✂ The creation accounts of Science and Religion can be reconciled

The Bible's account of Creation (Genesis 1-2) is a typically pictorial, symbolic way of communicating religious truth. The search for scientific truth doesn't clash with this: it just has a different angle of interest. It's not hard to harmonise the religious and the scientific interpretations of Creation. Modern **cosmology** describes the origin of the Universe in an event known as the **Big Bang**, and its development in terms of a process of **evolution**. Evolution is the unfolding of the potentialities that are in matter. All possibilities already exist in Divine Wisdom, but have to come to be in their specific creaturely uniqueness in the realm of creation. This theory of evolution doesn't clash with a belief in creation, for something has to come into being before it can evolve.

Furthermore, at each stage of an evolutionary process, there is something more, something really new coming into being. Creation is taking place. A belief in creation stresses that the Universe is a consequence of God's activity. The scientific concepts of the Big Bang and evolution are an attempt to say something coherent about how Creation occurs and develops.

The scientific quest for truth has produced many profound insights. One that is of critical consequence for our future, and for the future of planet Earth, is the realisation that everything in the Universe is interconnected and forms a whole, since all has arisen out of an evolutionary process going back to the original event. Furthermore, each entity or thing is a whole with parts, and at the same time, part of a greater whole.

✂ Creatures are both visible and invisible

Creation has two basic dimensions: the material and the spiritual - what the Christian Creed calls the 'visible' and the 'invisible'. We can also differentiate between the living and non-living in creation, and among the former, we can identify beings at different levels of consciousness.

Animals are created beings that are embodied and have consciousness. They form, as it were, a bridge in creation between the spiritual and the material. The way we name them – *anima* is the Latin for 'soul' – suggests that they are in close relationship to us in the order of creation. Like us, animals can learn to do new things and form new habits.

They have memories and so can teach their young to do these things too. On the other hand, Science, looking from the point of view of the visible body, regards the human being as the most highly evolved animal, called *Homo sapiens*. What distinguishes the human being, then? We are reflective, thinking, creative beings, able to bring new things like language, art and technology into the world. This is not to say, however, that animals do not have intrinsic worth. Basil the Great, the fourth century bishop of Caesarea, had the following prayer in his liturgy:

The Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. O God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things, our brothers the animals to whom you have given the earth as their home in common with us. We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised the high dominion of man with ruthless cruelty, so that the voice of the earth, which should have gone up to you in song, has been a groan of travail. May we realise that they live, not for us alone, but for themselves and for you, and that they have the sweetness of life.

✠ Human beings are an integral part of creation

The material and spiritual dimensions of the human being are generally called 'body' and 'soul'. To guard against a common, mistaken tendency called **dualism**, we must make it clear that the two dimensions are not separable. We can say that the spiritual and the material are the inside and outside of the same thing. They express the inwardness and outwardness of our being. Or, we can say that we are enfleshed spirits, our bodies being the visible means of expressing our interior, spiritual selves. If we emphasise one dimension at the expense of the other, we are distorting human life. It is just as false to glorify the spiritual above the material as it is to act as though the human person has only material needs. The human being is both body and soul, and both are unique to the individual. The Christian belief in the **resurrection** of the body affirms this.

As the resurrection of the body affirms our material nature, so the Christian belief in the transformation of the entire Universe affirms the Earth as our home. Human beings are earthlings, and not aliens or tourists on the planet. The Earth is not, using Julian Huxley's image, a pedestal on which human beings are set like statues, but rather a gigantic stalk on which humankind is the flower. Albert Nolan affirms our eternal earthiness thus:

There is only one world, one universe, one creation. It is both spiritual and material, and we are inextricably part of it. That is our faith even if many Christians and others moved away from that understanding during the last 300 years... Nor is creation something we have to put up with temporarily while we wait for death to release us into another world, a spiritual world. That is also not Christian faith, it is Greek philosophy. We human beings are material creatures and we always will be. That is why the Bible speaks of the resurrection of the body rather than the immortality of the soul.

Another dualistic view of human life is suggested by the distinction between natural and supernatural. Following this distinction it is thought that we receive a natural life at birth that does not contain within it the seeds of its own fulfilment. A special intervention on the part of God is required, called supernatural **grace**. But human existence is always a graced existence, radically oriented towards God. We begin life with an original blessing, and this is what the Christian sacrament of Baptism affirms, confirms, and celebrates. It is in our very nature, and indeed in the nature of all things, to reach towards completion and transformation in God. This is not to say – as we shall see clearly later – that the process of growth is not without obstacles and setbacks.

Within human life there is another set of dimensions, besides the material and the spiritual. Consider the individual dimension of life which concerns myself only, the social which concerns the human community, and the cosmic, concerning the whole of Creation. With regard to the first, the individual self is creative and dynamic, ever growing towards completion. With regard to the second, we are relational, reaching our fulfilment only through others. With regard to the last of these, we often forget how absolutely dependent we are. Indeed, the more complex the form of life is, the more radically is it dependent on all the stages of life that go before it. Plants, for instance, can photosynthesise without us, but we cannot live without plants' photosynthesis. In short, the human being is inseparable from the rest of creation.

Our view of human life becomes distorted when any of these three dimensions is lost sight of. For example, if I throw my litter on to the street, I may think I've solved my own litter problem, but I've set up a litter problem for other people, and I've added to the world's pollution. So, throwing my litter out on to the street is not a truly *human* solution.

Human beings, men and women, are made in the image of God

Both masculinity and femininity in creation come from the Creator. Both are reflections of the being of God. This does not mean that God is a bisexual being. God's being, while containing all the qualities to be found in creation, goes beyond them. It is because of the limitations of language, together with the dominance of men over women in recent history, that God tends to be called 'he'. God is just as much 'she' as 'he', being the origin equally of all that is 'she' and of all that is 'he'. The Bible says clearly that people are created in God's own image: 'male and female (God) created them' (Genesis 1:27). Thus human characteristics reflect the nature of God, and both men and women share what are regarded as the masculine and the feminine in proportions that are unique to the person. This is why manifestations of human sexuality are so individual.

There may be other conscious beings we are not aware of

Are there other beings, existing outside our space and time, or beyond the limits of our knowledge, who can know God? The Hebrew and Christian scriptures attest to the existence of created beings that are purely spiritual, having no material dimension, and who are ever present among us, even to the point of a guardian being assigned to each individual (Matthew 18:10). These beings, called **angels**, who usually make their presence known in human form, are just as real to the believer as material things that are evident to the senses. Their name describes their function, but not their nature – *angelos* is the Greek for 'messenger' – and they are in the service of God.

Remembering the uniqueness of Israel's faith in the One, universal God, Yahweh, in a world which generally believed in many local gods, it is possible to ascribe the emergence of a belief in angels in Israel to their way of making sense of the different ways in which God interacts with human beings. Certainly, in some scriptural accounts that feature angels, it is not clear whether the speaker or actor is God or some other being who mediates God's presence to the human persons in the story. This is particularly noticeable when Yahweh appears to Abraham at the Oak of Mamre (Genesis 18).

Differences are described in the angelic world, just as there are differences in the animal kingdom. Nine orders of angels are identified in some early schools of Christian theology – seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominations, virtues, powers, principalities,

archangels, and angels. The angels, furthermore, are seen as individual as humans are: every angel has a unique personality.

Many thinking people have abandoned belief in angels as outdated mythology. On the other hand there is a great revival of interest in them: a search on the internet will lead you to over 100 000 000 references! Does Scripture compel belief in such beings? Are angels part of revelation itself, or are they a part of the worldview in which people received this revelation? Certainly, they appear so often in the pages of Scripture that it becomes hard to deny that they at least represent some reality of which we know very little. Furthermore, common human experience points to the existence of some such realities or beings. So the question becomes: What term can our current worldview use to name such experiences?

If we accept angels as intelligent created beings, then how do we understand their coming into being from the point of view of evolution? One might argue that if the theory of evolution holds, then ever more conscious beings would come into existence as the Universe unfolds. The creation of angels, with higher consciousness, should therefore follow that of human beings. Scripture however indicates that the angels were even witnesses to the beginning of the material Universe (Job 38:4-7). The difficulty is resolved if evolution pertains only to those orders of being that have a material dimension.

Scripture describes angels as intelligent beings with freedom, and therefore having the capacity to reject God just as we do. Those angels who have rejected God are portrayed as demons or evil spirits who refuse to acknowledge and serve God. Whatever we make of angels and demons, Richard McBrien reminds us that “not every signal from the world of the numinous necessarily bears a message from God. The world of the numinous is as ambiguous and as fraught with sin as is the world of the tangible.”

Another question that captures our imagination is the possibility of there being other intelligent life forms in different parts of the Universe. Given the vastness of space, and the little we know, many think it quite likely. In fact there is a serious, well-coordinated search called SETI in progress. However, for our immediate purposes, the answer seems to make no essential difference. Yet, one meeting could change forever the way we think about ourselves and the Universe we live in.

✠ Everything that God creates is good

As all of creation comes from God's goodness, all created things are thoroughly good, and loved by God. The universe exists because God loves it: God's overflowing **agape** is the source of all being. Hence everything is a sacrament of the goodness and creative power of God. Plants and animals are not commodities to be consumed, but companions and helpers on our journey (Genesis 2:18-19). Furthermore, we share with them the status of creature, essentially poor in our finitude, with no greater or lesser claim to being. This explains how Francis of Assisi was able to see all creatures, both animate and inanimate, as his brothers and sisters. We saw earlier how Basil the Great also realised his kinship with the animals.

God keeps everything in existence, and pointed towards its goal, for God's love never tires. All things in the Universe, including each of us, are constant thoughts in the mind of God: it is God's thinking that gives us our existence. We call God's constant care 'providence'. Henri Lacordaire, a 19th century French Dominican priest, based his life upon this conviction. He wrote: "All that I know of tomorrow is that providence will rise before the sun." All this means too, of course, that humankind, as part of God's creation, is fundamentally good. We can say with Sebastian Moore that God is the One by whose

desire we exist, and that our self-realisation begins in the awakening of the sense that we are desired. The Second Vatican Council identifies this as the source of our dignity:

Our dignity rests above all on the fact that we are called to communion with God. The invitation to converse with God is addressed to us as soon as we come into being. For if we exist it is because God has created us through love, and through love continues to hold us in existence. We cannot live fully according to truth unless we freely acknowledge that love and entrust ourselves to our creator.

Creation is a sacrament of God's Presence

Creation's goodness and beauty let us experience something of the goodness and beauty of the God who created it. Every creature, animate or inanimate, is like a word that speaks of and points to God. When we see something grand and beautiful like a sunset, or the ocean, or a night sky jewelled with stars, we find that nature has the power to move us, by giving us a sense of something great. This experience is a bond uniting Christians with all whose religions and philosophies try to reach God through creation.

While we human beings are made in God's image, we do not exhaust that image. Indeed, a great variety of beings are needed to express the Divine Image more fully, and, in this expression the joy of each individual creature is enlarged. Every creature, in some way, enjoys the presence of God and so is able to express it. Denis Edwards puts it this way:

The divine artisan is not only manifested in the beauty and diversity of a tropical rain forest, but is also present to each creature of the forest as the creative power which enables it to be. Creation is a sacrament of the divine Presence.

We can say with the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God", so that religious experience is not experience of another world, but "the experience of the Divine, of some ultimate, transcendent presence or power that occurs in and through the experience of a person, thing, or event as a depth dimension to that ordinary experience".

From a Christian viewpoint, Creation cannot be fully understood if we leave Christ, its heart, out of the picture. In fact, knowing Christ intimately means knowing and understanding the whole Universe, since, as John emphasises, "not one thing came into being except through him" (John 1:3). All created things are as words spoken by God, kept together in being by the eternal Word, and brought to fulfillment by the action of God's Spirit. Teilhard de Chardin had a sense of Christ, in the Spirit, embedded within creation and drawing it forward to its completion. In the Incarnation, the flame of the Spirit lights up the whole world from within:

All things individually and collectively are penetrated and flooded by it, from the inmost core of the tiniest atom to the mighty sweep of the most universal laws of being: so naturally has it flooded every element, every energy, every connecting-link in the unity of our cosmos; that one might suppose the cosmos to have burst spontaneously into flame.

The Creator is a loving God

A word that describes well the way Christians experience the Creator is 'Father'. The Father is our ultimate origin. Not only does he bring us into being, but he keeps us in being. And just as a concerned human father doesn't stop short at initiating life, but also

supports it in every way, so God the Father cares for our needs, forgives and heals us, and helps us grow to maturity. Even those of us who have not experienced having a wonderful human father, can relate to the ideal and the need of true fatherhood.

It was this Father whom the Hebrews of old came to know as Yahweh. Jesus taught his followers to call God 'Father' and even 'Abba' which means something like 'Daddy' or 'Pappa'. As faith grows, the Christian learns to sense God as Father in many of his or her experiences – the sense of being guided, provided for, corrected, forgiven – in short, the sense of being loved. As Scripture puts it, 'God is love' (1John 4:16).

The tradition of calling God 'Father' has tended to restrict the Christian understanding of God to the masculine. But the Bible not only speaks of God as our Father but also uses many images of God as our Mother. In the words of the prophet Isaiah:

*You will be suckled, carried on her hip
And fondled in her lap.
As a mother comforts a child,
So I shall comfort you..*

Use of the term 'Mother' to describe God will ensure the inclusion in our thinking about God of those positive aspects such as generative power, life, fruitfulness, tenderness, compassion, and concern. It will also serve to stress the fact that not only man, but also woman, is made in the image of God. "Humankind is only complete as male and female and God is no less so. The picture or image of Him as the warrior is misleading without a picture of Her as a woman in labour," writes Rose Teteki Abbey, an African woman theologian. An exclusive use of male images results in maleness becoming identified with God, "as if maleness belongs to the essence of God, while femaleness does not."

The existence of evil and suffering does not limit the goodness of God

What we have said thus far about creation has been extremely hopeful and positive. But we cannot avoid the question of why there is evil, suffering and calamity in the world. It seems to fly in the face of a loving, all-knowing and all powerful God. This age-old dilemma was formulated as follows by the Greek philosopher, Epicurus:

Either God does not want to eliminate evil, or he cannot; either he can but does not want to; or he cannot and does not want to; or he wants to and can. If he can and does not want to, then he is evil, which must be against God's nature. If he does not want to and cannot, then he is evil and weak, and therefore he is no God. If he can and wants to, which can only be true of God, then where does evil come from and why does he not eliminate it?

Christian theology has made many attempts to answer this question – to reconcile the existence of evil and suffering with belief in the limitless goodness of God. Each attempt sheds a partial light and brings us some way towards a solution. Consider the following:

- ❖ Suffering and disaster serve the purpose of constantly reminding us of our status as creatures who are utterly dependent on God and others. The biblical Job is righteous, but mistaken. On awakening from his error, "he now views life not from an uncritical anthropocentric point of view but rather from the stance that allows him to acknowledge the divine, cosmic scope of creation and his limited human place in the very large plan of God."
- ❖ The presence of both good and evil enable people to develop as moral beings. If there were no suffering, what would call forth acts of compassion, sympathy, or sacrifice? And, for the sufferer, endurance and ultimate triumph over adversity develop a stature which he or she would not have otherwise achieved.

- ❖ Suffering and evil, in the view of Teilhard de Chardin, are inevitable. This is because the world is an evolving one, growing from imperfect states into more perfect ones. You can't have a perfect world and an evolving world at the same time, just as you cannot have a square circle. George Coyne, Director of the Vatican Observatory, describes God's working with the universe in terms of a parent and child. Allowing the child the freedom to grow means making provision for the experience of suffering.

God is working with the universe. The universe has a certain vitality of its own like a child does. It has the ability to respond to words of endearment and encouragement. You discipline a child but you try to preserve and enrich the individual character of the child and its own passion for life. A parent must allow the child to grow into adulthood, to come to make its own choices, to go on its own way in life... In such wise ways we might imagine that God deals with the universe.

Finally, one can look at the problem by turning it upside down. As suffering and evil are a problem for faith, so goodness is a problem for unbelief or atheism. For, if there were no God, then the concept of 'good' would be relative. What we call 'good' would simply be what society requires in order to function, or it would be a matter of a decision based on personal feeling. Either way, it would be unlikely, if not impossible, to find agreement. How, for instance, would we judge between what Hitler and what Mother Teresa felt was right?

Glossary items ⇨

Agape

Christian writers have generally described *agape*, as expounded on by Jesus, as a form of love which is both unconditional and volitional, that is, it is non-discriminating with no pre-conditions and is something that one decides to do. This is in contrast to *philia* (brotherly or sisterly affection) and *eros* (affection of a sexual nature).

Angels

The English word comes from the Greek *angelos*, meaning messenger. Angels are immaterial spirits created by God to regulate the order of the world and to serve as messengers to human beings. Because of the Bible's cosmology which asserts that the earth is flat, that it is covered by a metal firmament or dome, and that God resides in Heaven above the dome, angels have often been portrayed as having wings so that they could fly. Angels are also believed to be spiritual guides of individual persons. In this case, they are called guardian angels.

Animals

Animals are sentient, material beings – fruits of the creative evolutionary process, and parts of God's self-revelation. Each animal tells part of the story of the inexhaustible wonder that is God. Animals play a definite role in the salvation of the human family in that they are called to serve temporarily as food and beasts of burden.

Big Bang

The Big Bang Theory is based on the observation that the galaxies of the Universe are receding from each other. In other words the Universe is expanding. This means that the Universe was much smaller long ago, and if you go back far enough everything we can see today originated in a hot dense fireball - the Big Bang. Primordial matter exploded, and the various particles became the galaxies, stars and planets which are still moving out and away from each other.

Cosmology

While theology is our talk about God, cosmology is the study of the universe in its totality and our place within it. Human beings have always sought to explain the existence and nature of the world (cosmos). The resulting explanations, or cosmologies, play an important role in shaping our understanding of our role in the universe, our relationship to other created beings, and to God. The current Science and Religion

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debate has much to do with harmonising a Christian biblical cosmology and a scientific cosmology that has emerged through scientific experiment and astronomical observation.

Dualism

Dualism is a way of looking at reality, or the universe, as made up of two distinct kinds of being or substance, the material and the spiritual. In this view, the human being is seen as consisting of two separate things, body and soul, where the body is little more than a container for the soul. The body's natural environment is Earth, while the soul is only at home in Heaven. A dualistic worldview often leads to a negative attitude towards the human body, and material creation in general. Monism, on the other hand, sees the Universe as one, where all realities are inter-related. In this view, the human body and soul are two sides of the one coin that cannot live in separation, and Heaven and Earth are not two distinct worlds, but rather experiences, as it were of life from the inside and the outside respectively.

Evolution

The theory of evolution holds that all things in the universe are interrelated since they emerge from a single process of development, beginning with the Big Bang some 10-15 billion years ago. About 5000 million years ago what is now the Earth was a mass of hot gas, which is said to have broken off from the Sun and started revolving in space. Gradually the gas began to cool down and become solid and rock was formed from about 4000 million years ago. Continuous evolution produced organisms of increasing complexity: plants appeared about 3000 million years ago, followed by animal life some 2500 million years later. Human beings emerged quite recently between 2 and 4 million years ago.

Grace

Grace is God's help or favour. But it is not something external to God that can be contained or measured. Grace is the very life or energy of God that is made freely available to human beings. Gratitude – the word comes from the same root as grace – is the appropriate response to God's loving, generous, free and totally unexpected and undeserved relations with human beings.

Resurrection

The Christian belief in the resurrection of the body is an affirmation of two things – that death is not the annihilation of the human person, and that a human person's existence beyond death is an embodied one. What sort of embodiment this will be is beyond our present experience. Even so, Paul tries to give his readers some of idea of what it will be like (1Corinthians 15).

LESSON 12: God the Creator



FOCUS	God – Trinity; Jesus – God and Man
REFERENCE	<i>The Christian Story</i> (Chapter 4, p.23-29)
GLOSSARY	Mystery, Monotheism, Sanctification, Heresy, Monophysites, Docetists

LESSON SUGGESTIONS [⇒ ⇒ ⇒]

⇒ **Introduction**

This chapter of *The Christian Story* deals with two fundamental Christian beliefs – the three-in-oneness of God, and the incarnation of the Son in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Text

Read the sections “There is a God”, “God is one single being” and “God is a Trinity.”

⇒ **Exercise**

Six images of Trinity are given below. Learners in groups discuss these images, choosing the one they judge to give the clearest understanding of the nature of God as three-in-one.

⇒ **Presentation**

Emphasise that there is no one picture or symbol that explains the Trinity perfectly because God is essentially mystery. You could make the point with the following legend:

St Augustine, so the story goes, came upon a small boy trying with a bucket to empty the ocean into a hole in the sand. The saint explained to the boy that what he was attempting was impossible. He could spend his whole life at it without ever achieving what he had set out to do. “Isn’t that what you’re doing trying to understand the mystery of the Trinity?” replied the boy before disappearing.

Offer the following by way of summary:

Simon Barrow, an English theologian, expresses it like this (quoted from *Three Ways to make sense of One God*):

- “The life of God is the origin and destiny of the whole universe. But that alone is not enough. (God is too remote and untouchable.)
- So God is also the transforming life we see in Jesus. But that is not enough. (Jesus’ life and death can only touch those who know of him.)
- So God is also given as the Holy Spirit, as the transformative possibility of God between human beings, between us and creation, and between us and the God who comes to us in Jesus.”

Text

Now read the final section, “In Jesus, we experience God, and God experiences humanity.”

⇒ **Exercise-Discussion**

Print and distribute the page below titled “Who Is Jesus Christ?” Invite learners to respond to each of the statements individually before opening up discussion. The key to the exercise is keeping in balance the tension between Jesus as fully divine and Jesus as fully human. (See Hebrews 4:16).


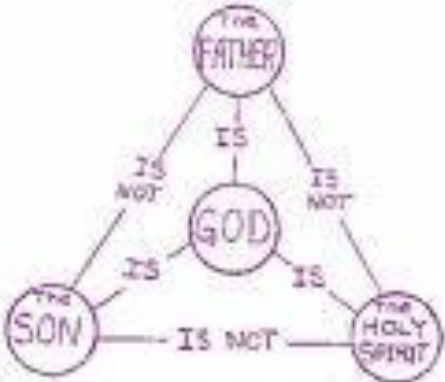




 **Text**

Now reread the final section, “In Jesus, we experience God, and God experiences humanity.”

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Which do you think is in danger of being undermined in today’s Church: the divinity of Christ, or his humanity?
- If Jesus was fully human, was he capable of sinning?
- Is it true to say that Jesus was ignorant of certain things, and that he sometimes made mistakes?
- Did Jesus have sexual desires?
- If it were historically verified that Jesus was married, would it make a significant difference to Christian faith?
- How can we see God face to face if God is spirit?
- Think about your images of God through your life. Who was/is God for you as a child? Today? Can you think of an event which led to a change in your image?

IMAGES OF TRINITY

<p>1</p> 	<p>2</p>  <pre>graph TD FATHER((The FATHER)) --- IS1[IS] --- GOD((GOD)) FATHER --- ISNOT1[IS NOT] --- SON((The SON)) FATHER --- ISNOT2[IS NOT] --- SPIRIT((The HOLY SPIRIT)) SON --- IS2[IS] --- GOD SPIRIT --- IS3[IS] --- GOD SON --- ISNOT3[IS NOT] --- SPIRIT</pre>
<p>3</p> 	<p>4</p> 
<p>5</p> 	<p>6</p> 

WHO IS JESUS CHRIST?

Mark each statement T (TRUE), F (FALSE) OR ? (I=AM NOT SURE)

1. Jesus was as much a person as I am.
2. Jesus sometimes broke Sabbath laws.
3. Jesus right now is no longer a person.
4. Jesus preached against sexual sins often.
5. Jesus is alive today.
6. Jesus knew all things since the time he was a child.
7. Jesus was, in no sense, a revolutionary.
8. Jesus still has human consciousness and human feelings.
9. Jesus taught a morality different from that in the Ten Commandments.
10. Jesus had sexuality.
11. Jesus liked some people more than others.
12. Jesus took on a fully human condition.
13. Jesus taught religious doctrines.
14. Jesus looked and acted like a human person, but he was really God inside.
15. Jesus set up the position of pope and bishops as we have them today.
16. Jesus grew as a person through the affection of his parents and friends.
17. Jesus is present at Mass before the consecration.
18. The gospels are historical accounts of the life of Christ.
19. Jesus is the same today as he was when he walked in Palestine.
20. Jesus made a free decision to die on the cross.

Lesson Materials

God the Creator

✂ There is a God

Christian theology starts from a belief that there is a transcendent being, a Creator who is the loving source and destiny of our being and of the whole Universe. To say that God is transcendent means that God is not one of the things or forces or persons of our ordinary world, but their ground, which gives them meaning. Yet God is in the world, and we can relate to God person-to-person.

A faith-directed human experience of life consolidates this belief, especially the experience of Christ, the person who, for the believer, is all the proof he or she needs that such a being is real. Desmond Tutu, speaking for those who have “suckled the breast of our mother, Africa”, agrees with this when he asks:

Don't most of us, for instance, find the classical arguments for the existence of God just an interesting cerebral game because Africa taught us long ago that life without belief in a supreme divine being was just too absurd to contemplate? And don't most of us thrill as we approach the awesomeness of the transcendent when many other of our contemporaries find even the word God an embarrassment?

Still, “a warm heart is no guarantee against an empty mind”, and the believer needs to be able to give an account of what he or she holds in faith (1 Peter 3:15). Reason points to the existence of God in the following ways:

- ❖ The world around us does not explain its own existence. This explanation must lie in some other reality. That reality we call God.
- ❖ The wonderful design we can see everywhere in nature – the purposeful way in which all things work together – points to a Designer.
- ❖ Our desire for God is evidence that God does exist, just as thirst points to water's existence. Where does our desire come from? Where do our deepest questions come from?

Note that reason points to God, but it does not prove God's existence. I cannot point to or fix my mind on God as I can on some object in the world. God's reality is of a different kind. It is **mystery**. But this does not mean that we cannot know anything about God; it means that God is infinitely knowable and new. Mystery is not a stop-sign but an invitation to keep going further. If we do not keep going further, thinking that we've grasped God, then we need to heed Augustine's caution: “If you have understood, then what you have understood is not God!” The mystery we call God is introduced to us through Revelation - the things God does in our human world. We have already considered how Tradition, both oral and written, are channels through which this Revelation comes to us, and how it develops from seed to tree in full fruit.

✂ God is one single being

The first thing Christians believe about God is that there is only one being worthy of the Name. This belief, called **monotheism**, is shared with Jews and Muslims. *Mono* means ‘one’ and *theos* means ‘God’.

Secondly, God is undivided, not made up of parts. God is a spiritual being, and unlike matter, spirit cannot be divided. It has no material dimensions, and therefore cannot be seen. Spirit is not confined within the limits of space and time. Spirit is simply *present* wherever it operates. God, therefore, has the capacity to be simultaneously present everywhere in the Universe, and to see the whole of time and human history in the present. Is this also the experience of the human spirit? It is our destiny to be like God, but our present experience is limited by our living within the boundaries of space and time.

God is a Trinity

Christians also believe that in this one God, there are three Persons. The basic experience that gave rise to this teaching is that of Jesus' disciples. They recognised God as origin and end of their lives (Father), God revealed and known in Jesus (Son or Word), and God in them as his own self-love (Spirit).

Now, much has been said and written down the centuries in an attempt to explain this teaching that God is a Trinity of Persons. Before we consider some of the ways this mystery has been thought about, let's be mindful of Augustine's warning. We need to realise that our language is always inadequate to the task of talking about God. Whatever analogy we may use to express our understanding of the Trinity, it is bound to be fraught with difficulty, and likely to end in error if pressed too far. This is because analogy at the same time both affirms and denies something about the thing being described. When we call God 'Father', for instance, we are affirming that God is like a parent to us. But we are also saying that God is unlike any parent we know.

One way we can think of God is as a community, because in a community we see both unity and distinct persons. A family – mother, father, and child – is an example that can help us understand God as a Trinity of Persons. And if we consider that the Bible says we are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), we can see our human instinct towards community as a reflection of the fact that God is a community. But, again, be warned! God is unlike any community we know, because the Persons in God are not persons as we understand them. Once we think of God as three persons, each with their own individual wills, we fall into a belief in three gods. In God there is "only one power, one will, only one self-presence."

We can also make the opposite mistake when trying to explain the Trinity using an analogy such as water, ice, and steam — three forms of the same substance. Father, Son, and Spirit are not three forms of God. This is the mistake called modalism, prevalent in the 3rd century, which taught that God is one person who appears in three different roles.

The idea of community lends itself easily to thinking about trinity. But an opposite approach, so to speak – looking at the individual human being – is favoured by Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and other theologians. If I am made in the image of God, then I ought to be able to discover in myself a reflection of God's threeness, which I can then apply to God in order to understand what God's being a Trinity means. Augustine Shutte explains:

(As a person) I am able to know myself as such. And this self-knowledge is not something other than myself. It is what makes me me: a self that knows itself. Nor do I only know myself. I also affirm, enact myself. I accept myself, choose myself, love or hate the self that I know myself to be. This affective self-affirmation is different from self-knowledge, yet it is also what makes me me. I cannot not do it. Hence there are in the human self these three structural elements that constitute its personal reality and unity: the self as known, the self as affirmed, and the self that both knows and affirms itself. This is the pattern that Christianity recognises in God

in the doctrine of the Trinity.

Another approach to understanding the trinitarian nature of God is that of Richard of St Victor who died in 1173. Since God is supreme in goodness, happiness, and glory, there must be in God the supreme expression of self-transcending and mutual love between at least two persons. The Person of the Son, originating from the Father, is a perfect image of the Father – not like the images of ourselves in the mirror, but perfect to the point of being as alive as the Father! Because the Son is a perfect image of the Father, God's own Self, he is a perfect communication (Word) of all that we are invited to become, since we are created in the image of God. This Son, this Word, is the person we meet incarnate in Jesus Christ, Emmanuel (God-with-us). It is this fellow human being, Jesus, who shows and establishes God's Kingdom within the human community. And it is this same Jesus, now the Risen Christ, who walks with his followers as friend and shepherd.

Now real love, continues Richard, does not remain with the two, but wants to share love with another. For full love, we look for one who can share our love for the beloved. This is the Holy Spirit, or “common friend” of the Father and the Son. So, the Person of the Spirit originates from the perfect love between the Father and the Son – a mutual self-giving that is so perfect and so complete that it is as alive as the givers are! It is this Spirit that God breathes into the Church to give it life as the Body of Christ, continuing his presence and his work of transformation in the world. And it is this Spirit that brings about the **sanctification** of those who follow Jesus' way, gently thrusting them in the direction of the fulfilment God intends for the human family – a thrust we speak of as grace.

Richard of Victor's approach puts love at the centre of God's being. This fits well with John's description of God as love (1 John 4:8). To say that love is God's essence presupposes that God is in some sense a community of persons, for, if God were a single person (a being who can relate to another), then God would need someone outside of God in order to love.

So, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are ONE in *being*, but THREE distinct Persons. Whichever way we think of it, our reason will never be able to exhaust the mystery of the Trinity. Nor will our reason be able to contradict it! It remains an inexhaustible source of insight.

Talking about the three Persons, instead of vaguely talking about God, makes us think about different possible ways of relating to God – for example, as Creator, as Father or Mother, as Brother, as Saviour, as Sanctifier or Animator. Instead of thinking of God as being distant, we see that God is involved with us in our every need. Prayers in the Catholic liturgy tend to draw together the roles that all three Persons of the Trinity play in human life.

Catherine LaCugna shows that the mystery of God and the mystery of salvation are, in fact, inseparable. In other words, we cannot understand God apart from what God does in the world. She writes:

The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life...The doctrine of the Trinity, which is the specifically Christian way of speaking about God, summarises what it means to participate in the life of God through Jesus Christ in the Spirit. The mystery of God is revealed in Christ and the Spirit as the mystery of love, the mystery of persons in communion who embrace death, sin, and all forms of alienation for the sake of life. Jesus Christ, the visible icon of the invisible God, discloses what it means to be fully personal, divine as well as human. The Spirit of God, poured into our hearts as love (Romans 5:5), gathers us together into the body of Christ, transforming us so that

“we become by grace what God is by nature,” namely, persons in full communion with God and with every creature.

✠ In Jesus, we experience God, and God experiences humanity

By now it may be clear to you that the heart of Christian theology is a human person: Jesus, the Christ, the full communication of God's own self. Christians therefore believe that Jesus is the main way we come to know God. Whatever we see in him is a true insight into God. Jesus is also the main way we can be sure that God knows 'from the inside' what it's like to be human. God has actually shared our experience of being human – the loneliness, the tensions, the questions, the excitements, the temptations, the joys, the sufferings. In Jesus, God owns the world and its destiny – and not just for the thirty-six years Jesus lived on Earth. God's inner life is now forever related to humankind.

So Jesus is the connection, or link, between God and us. He belongs to God and he also belongs to us. He is God's total self-giving, and human being's total acceptance of that gift. He is a child of his mother, Mary, who opened herself entirely to God's self-giving. He is truly God and he is also truly human. Jesus is a connection that we can not only see but also experience. That is why we can say that he is the Sacrament of God and of God's Reign, because in his humanity we can see visible signs of the invisible God and of the invisible Reign of God on earth.

We call this mystery of God's Word becoming human the Incarnation. Together with the mystery of the Trinity, it is a continuing source of insight for us. It suggests, as we have seen, that God experiences our life. God is in touch with history, creatively integrating all that happens in the Universe just as we creatively integrate our bodily influences. So nothing that we do, or think, or feel today escapes God's intimate knowledge. God is at the heart of the Universe, at the heart of life and of our very being.

Christians, in the early centuries of the Church, struggled to accommodate the idea of Jesus being a single person, yet having two natures - human and divine. This struggle led to a number of **heresies**. Arius, a 4th century priest in Alexandria, and his followers held that Jesus was only a human creature, not equal to the Father. On the other hand, the **Monophysites** in the 5th century maintained that he had only a divine nature. Leaning in a similar direction were the **Docetists** who, holding the notion that matter was evil, taught that Jesus had no material body, only a phantom one: he only seemed to suffer and die. In the middle of these two positions was Nestorius who argued that Jesus was, in fact, two persons, one human and one divine. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 made the following pronouncement in order to settle the issue:

We confess that one and the same Christ, Lord, and only-begotten Son, is to be acknowledged in two natures without confusion, change, division, or separation. The distinction between the natures was never abolished by their union, but rather the character proper to each of the two natures was preserved as they came together in one person.

The idea of two natures (humanity and divinity) in one person (Jesus) is not as strange as it may sound at first. We ourselves have both a bodily nature and a spiritual nature. And our speech has both the nature of our voice and the nature of our thoughts and feelings. Jesus is like a coin with two faces. When it is at rest, you only see one of them. You have to keep picking it up and turning it around to remind yourself of both faces. Right through the twenty centuries since Jesus, Christians have struggled to keep both his humanity and his divinity equally in view. Often the picture has become distorted. You'll see signs of this in art and books and living ideas. Part of the Christian calling is to play a part in protecting this

belief from such distortion, because the living out of Christianity depends on the way Christ is seen.

Jesus is like a coin with two faces in another respect too. Jesus as a man, and as Son of God presents a male figure. If in Jesus we see God, does it mean that God is male? We know that this is not so. We have already seen that God is neither male nor female, containing both qualities and transcending both. But, in becoming a human being, God was subject to all the limitations of being human. One of these limitations is that a human being has to be either a male or a female. Jesus was a man. However, as we've also noted, every human being has a unique configuration of characteristics, such as initiative, leadership, humility, and compassion – some culturally regarded as masculine and others as feminine. The more grown the person becomes, the more fully do all these characteristics develop harmoniously towards human completeness. In Jesus we certainly find the truth of this.

By the way, it is a mistake to think that Mary is the one who incarnates God's femininity; Mary certainly reflects this, but Jesus himself incarnates it, just as much as he does God's masculinity.

Jesus really does incarnate the completeness of God. But to say that Jesus incarnates the completeness of God does not mean that he reveals everything there is to know or experience about God. That would mean that God is limited, for Jesus is a finite human being just like you or I. On the other hand it does mean that Jesus brings us into contact with God in a definitive way.

Docetists

The teaching of this 1st century group is so named after the Greek word *dokeo*, which means 'to seem'. Jesus only seemed to be human, the Docetists held. The apostle John, it is said, used to avoid the public baths in Ephesus when their leader, Cerinthus, was there for fear of being in the presence of 'an enemy of the truth'. Irenaeus says that John wrote his gospel to refute Cerinthus, and in John's letters his position on the humanity of Jesus is clearly and strongly stated (1John 4:2-3).

Heresy

The fundamental meaning of 'heresy' is not so much 'incorrect teaching', as the consequences of such a teaching, especially when groups or sects form around it to break the bond of charity that unites the community of believers. A heresy then is a faction. But in a looser use of the term, 'heresy' has come to mean the divisive teaching itself.

Monophysites

Mono means 'one' in Greek, and *physis* means 'nature'. We recognise the latter term in our word 'physics', which is the study of nature. The Monophysites were a 5th century group in the Church who opposed the idea of there being two natures, human and divine, in the one person of Jesus. They recognised only one – the divine – and hence were called Monophysites.

Monotheism

Monotheism, a belief in one god, can be distinguished from atheism (belief in no god), polytheism (belief in many gods), and pantheism (belief that God is inseparable from the world). Islam's monotheism is drawn from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and Christianity's belief derives from Israel's faith in Yahweh.

Mystery

The English word 'mystery' takes its origin from the Greek *mysterion*, which means a rite or teaching that is secret. Only a *mystes*, or one who has been initiated, has access to the knowledge and meaning of this rite or doctrine. The word *mysterion* is translated into Latin as *sacramentum*, and from this comes the word 'sacrament'. It is through the sacraments that the knowledge and meaning of the Kingdom of God are shared symbolically in the community's worship. More generally, the idea of mystery signifies something, the knowledge of which can only be gained through some kind of initiation, and which is never exhausted.

Sanctification

If salvation is seen as the action of Jesus, making the Holy Spirit present in the world, then sanctification is the process whereby the individual is made whole (holy) through opening one's being to the influence of the Spirit.

LESSON 13: The Origin of Sin



FOCUS	Original Sin (Actual sin – personal and structural)
REFERENCE	<i>The Christian Story</i> (Chapter 5, p.30-37)
GLOSSARY	Sin, Satan, Actual Sin, Fasting, Penance, Structural Sin

LESSON SUGGESTIONS [⇒📖 ⇒📖]

⇒ **Reflection-Discussion**

Learners in groups consider the following:

- Throughout time groups have been trying to develop the ideal society or utopia. Is it possible? If so, what components need to be considered? Pick those characteristics that you think are most vital to the success of a utopia.
- Now, look at the world as it is in your experience. Reflect on those characteristics you have listed. Are they evident? Why? Why not?
- Give feedback to the whole class.

📖 **Text**

Read the following sections: “Original sin opposes the fulfilment of human nature”, “Original sin is an event at the dawn of human self-consciousness” and “Original sin is a condition which every human being is born into.”

⇒ **Exercise**

Learners now write a written response to the three questions posed at the beginning of the chapter (p 30): (a) What is sin? (b) Where does it come from? (c) How does it affect our lives?

📖 **Text**

Complete the reading of the chapter: “Original sin inclines us to actual sin” and “Actual sin hardens into shared sinful ways.”

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Do you think the idea of sin has gone out of fashion? Do you ever hear anyone – outside of Church – using this term?
- How does your church define sin?



Lesson Materials

The Origin of Sin

Jesus was not born into a completed and perfect world, but into a developing world, a world of limitation, suffering and *sin*. We need to understand the present condition of our world, on the one hand, and, on the other, what it will become for us when we cooperate with the creative direction that God has implanted in the inner nature of things. We cannot single-handedly remove our limitations, or eradicate suffering and sin. What can be done? In this chapter we will explore the unfinished state of the world we live in, with a particular focus on the idea of sin. We need to include this reality in our way of seeing things. What, then, is sin? Where does it come from? How does it affect our lives?

Original sin opposes the fulfilment of human nature

At our creation, God places us on the path to life, and imbues us with a gentle but constant thrust towards our destiny. This thrust is the work of God's Spirit within us, and we call it grace, our original blessing. Together with this thrust towards becoming fully human, we receive from God a guiding word that sets boundaries for our protection. We are to be creative without losing sight of the reality that we are ourselves created and therefore limited both by the Earth which mothers us, and by our human natures by which we are most intimately connected to Earth and, through Earth, to the whole cosmos.

From the very beginning of human history, human beings have been caught up in a huge struggle against a power that opposes God's wisdom, suggesting that we doubt the blessing and ignore the word of caution. Juan Luis Segundo sees this power as a force inherent in the Universe from the very beginning. He writes: "...if sin exists and operates on the human level, then it must assume more primitive forms in the whole process of universal evolution that leads towards man" and he identifies the most primitive form as entropy, explained scientifically in the Second Law of Thermo-dynamics as the tendency of the Universe to prefer chaos above order. Think, for instance, what happens to an untended garden or a house that is not maintained. When we apply this idea to human beings, we call this tendency to do evil or harm original sin.

The power that draws an intelligent being to do evil is understood in Scripture to be personal, and no longer an abstract force, or tendency, like entropy. Fallen angels, led by *Satan* ('the adversary', commonly called the devil), whose rebellion against God became a source of evil for our human world, urge us to doubt the goodness of God and ourselves, and hence to do evil. Whether this urging comes from personal spiritual beings, as described in Scripture, or from inner psychological realities is not the issue here. But, caught up in this conflict, humankind is obliged to wrestle constantly in order to cling to the good. It is as if we are battling to walk against a powerful wind, even as we are gently nudged towards life by the breath of God's Spirit within us.

Original Sin, or the beginning of sin in humanity's story, can be seen in two ways: both as a primordial EVENT in human history, and as an enduring CONDITION of human existence brought about by that event. Let us consider some of the ways in which theologians try to explain this.

Original sin is an event at the dawn of human self-consciousness

Let's first look at original sin as an event from an evolutionary perspective. In this view, each new stage of the universe is a development of the previous stage towards greater complexity in things. The more complex a thing is, the more it is a single whole: think of the difference between a stone and a cow, for example. And the more of a single whole a thing is, the more it is in control of itself and its life. Are we human beings the crown of evolution? We are self-determining, and in this, we are made "in the image and likeness of God". A famous evolutionary scientist, Sir Julian Huxley, has said that, in humanity, evolution "has become conscious of itself". Humanity may be seen as a microcosm of the universe, the thing in which every other kind of thing is included.

Human beings have moved through different stages in the evolution of their consciousness. In the beginning, they were fully inserted into the circle of life, and were guided by instincts that did not harm themselves or their environment. But life was a struggle to provide their two basic needs – a need for nature to keep them alive and well, and a need for each other in order to be happy. As self-consciousness dawned, they became aware of the possibility of stepping out of the circle, and making their own considered decisions. We might say that they were blinded by the first sight of the rising sun! They became aware of good and evil, of life and death. As told in the Bible, Adam and Eve disconnected themselves from God's plan and thus from God's grace – that gentle thrust of the Spirit in the direction of completion and fulfilment. Sin is a movement in the opposite direction to grace. It is a "huge, universal, inertial force that resists this creative movement of the Spirit towards wholeness *in* people and oneness among people." In this sense, sin is anything that is opposed to the meaning of history, which is the establishment and completion of the Reign of God.

We can see the mythical story of Adam and Eve as a representation of our common human experience. It is certainly true of each of us that as children we grow in self-consciousness to the point of becoming aware of our power to make decisions, and ones that may go against our parents' guiding word. But, as adults too, we are confronted daily with fundamental choices. What do we make of the injunction "Do not eat" when we consider issues like cloning, genetic engineering, nuclear power, euthanasia or abortion? Adam and Eve were not wrong in wanting to be like God, understanding the Universe and being self-determining. After all, is this not what God desires for us? They were wrong in their refusal to recognise their dependence on God for the fulfilment of their destiny. They wanted to be on an equal footing with God, claiming their life as a right rather than receiving it as a gift. But their power alone was insufficient: love is the power that drives the Universe, and that means interdependence.

Original sin is a condition which every human being is born into

Next, let's look at original sin as a condition we inherit. We know that, in the physical world, every action brings a reaction. Science encapsulates this knowledge in Newton's Third Law of Motion. Something similar is true of human actions. The sinful action of humans in the beginning brought negative consequences, damaging humanity and the world in which we live. It is a damaged world that is passed on to us, even while it is graced. Or, to put it another way, the sin of others is a universal and permanent part of the human condition from the beginning, and is, in this sense, original. We get a shadowy idea of this when we hear of the effect of drugs taken by a pregnant woman on her unborn baby. Or we can imagine the possible consequences on the human beings of the

future if scientists manipulate our genetic structure in a foolishly irresponsible way. We can picture the state of original sin as a polluted environment, threatening all life on the planet, brought about by our curiosity and the unleashing of powers we were not familiar with, and our resulting inner state as a loss of innocence. The prophet Isaiah (24:4) sees it this way:

*The earth is mourning, pining away,
The pick of earth's people are withering away.
The earth is defiled
by the feet of its inhabitants,
For they have transgressed the laws,
Violated the decree, broken the everlasting covenant.*

As a result of the damage original sin does to humanity, we are born into a world lacking something that should be there. This lack we describe by using various negative words, such as disorder, discord, disharmony. Through original sin there is a disorder in our relationship with God and God's design. This discord or disharmony can only be remedied by grace, which turns us back in the right direction. Only grace can give us the power to love and obey God.

But what really is the origin of this discord? Our discussion thus far has suggested a number of possibilities. Traditional theology has consistently named pride as the motivation for original sin. But, if we consider early human experience as it develops towards self-consciousness, perhaps it is more a case of the child who is innately curious and capable in him or herself of all things imaginable than of stubborn opposition to authority. When self-consciousness dawns, the awareness of human limitation comes as a disappointment, if not as a shock. Sebastian Moore sees the origin of the condition we call original sin as "the denial... of our sense of being good or desirable as we come to self-awareness in our animal nature." The snake's temptation in the garden implied that the human condition in its present state was not as good as it might be, but that eating the fruit of the tree would remedy that. The sense of having fallen for the snake's trick only confirmed for the man and the woman their sense of worthlessness as they hid from Yahweh among the trees. (Genesis 3)

The doctrine of original sin emerged in the light of early Christian experience. The first followers of Jesus "realised the abyss of wretchedness out of which they had been lifted. That abyss they saw as a state of self-exclusion from the Creator and consequent disharmony with each other and with the universe." Their experience also convinced them of the entire human race's need for the salvation of Christ. Of course, the Hebrew scriptures show a much older awareness of this impaired human condition in the Book of Genesis. But it speaks in mythological language. "The new explanation", says Sebastian Moore, "is that original sin is the universally, culturally propagated and reinforced, human response to the traumas of coming out of animality into self-awareness, into the knowledge of good and evil... (It) is a stuckness of humankind at its first stage of consciousness, a kind of universal arrested development. It is called sin quite appropriately, because for an essentially growing being to refuse to grow is to go against its nature... It is a radical mistrust of life which resists change."

Does inheriting the condition we call 'original sin' mean that all human beings are born sinners needing personal forgiveness – as the psalmist seems to imply: "Remember, I was born guilty, a sinner from the moment of conception." (Psalm 51:5) Former baptismal practice, especially of infants, reinforced this idea. No, we are not born sinners, but we

are born into an incomplete world – one in which sin is possible, and in our first few years of childhood we lack the consciousness and power to resist the influence of the culture we have inherited, and so are drawn towards sin.

Original sin inclines us to actual sin

Original sin, or the not-feeling-good-about-ourselves, has the effect of producing disordered tendencies in us. It is the origin of the sin of not doing what is good. We find in ourselves a readiness to do wrong – our intellect is darkened and our will is weakened. This is present in us from the beginning; it isn't created by our wrong acts. However, our repeated wrong actions certainly consolidate it. We use the word vice for wrong actions that come easily through habit. Traditionally, the seven basic vices – and disordered tendencies – have been listed as: pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, jealousy, and laziness. Their counteractive virtues (good habits) are: humility, generosity, purity, gentleness, moderation, love and zeal.

Original sin leads to our disordered tendencies, and our disordered tendencies lead us towards **actual sin**. But they don't force us to sin, for sinning always involves choosing freely. So whatever temptations we experience, no matter how compelling or embarrassing they might seem to be, are not sin. We sin when we give in to them. We are co-operating with God's grace when we take precautions against the dangers of sin and when we repair the damage of sin by self-discipline – for example, by our practice of forms of **fasting** and **penance**.

Actual sin hardens into shared sinful ways

Human life, as we have already seen, has three dimensions: individual, social and cosmic. Sin therefore has these dimensions too. There is:

- ❖ **INDIVIDUAL SIN:** disorder within a human person – for example, disorder between appetite and health;
- ❖ **SOCIAL SIN:** disorder within human society – for example, unjust arrangements and laws resulting from injustice and causing further injustice;
- ❖ **COSMIC SIN:** disorder on planet Earth – for example, between humankind and our natural environment.

The last two are sometimes spoken of as **structural sin** and the first as personal sin. But in a more radical sense, all sins are personal, because they come from people. And most sins have structural aspects as well, because people live in a web of connections. What happens is that the actual sins of individuals build up and harden into shared sinful ways. It may help you to think of the way a path across a field is formed. Individual people tread across the field repeatedly in a particular direction, and their constant treading gradually establishes a path where the grass stops growing. In time, the path itself tends to lead people across the field in the established way. Consider, for example, how racial prejudice in colonial Africa gradually established racist ways of life, which became passed on by law in South Africa. Think of how unchecked market-based economy leads to a growing gap between the rich and the poor. Or think of how the subordination of women to men is the result of cultural conditioning and not part of the created order. Thinking further on the last of these examples from an evolutionary perspective suggests another view of structural sin. Do structures become sinful when they are maintained against the evolutionary direction of creation? Perhaps the subordination of women was a phase in the evolution of humankind which is currently breaking down into chaos, making

way for a new paradigm. Sin lies in going against this current, trying to prevent the emergence of a more just dispensation. We will likely reflect in time to come that our interpretation, in practice, of the equality of men and women will itself be in need of transformation.

Though all sin may have a personal dimension, it is also true that it has a structural one. We might say that original sin, as part of our inheritance, is fundamentally a structural affair. We are born into patterns established long before us that give rise to an inclination to sin. Freedom from sin for all humanity, then, will mean the growth of justice, or the coming of the Reign of God, which will restore the pattern of original blessing and remove the inclination to run counter to it.

Before we leave this discussion of sin, we would do well to clarify its relationship to the experience of death. Scripture's words, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23) have led believers to a wholly negative perception. Death is a natural ending to life in the material world, but because of its mystery, it takes on the darkest negative shade. We tend to experience death as the dreadful extinction of our whole existence. This way of experiencing death is the result of sin, for sin puts us out of harmony with God's ideas. But the Gospel teaches through the resurrection of Jesus that death is the way in which our destiny is fulfilled: death is our entry into complete life. God's grace enables us to make something life-giving out of this experience, because it is grace which puts us back in harmony with God's thinking.

Finally, if death is essentially positive, does sin, which seems inescapable, have any redeeming feature? The *Exsultet* in the Easter liturgy exclaims "O happy fault! O necessary sin of Adam!" Does doing wrong and having to live with the consequences help us to grow in consciousness? We can ponder this question in the light of Jesus' own words: "It is someone who is forgiven little who shows little love." (Luke 7:47) We might also ponder on whether a person can experience union with another – in this case, God – without first having known separation. Whatever judgement we make on this score, it is salutary to remember that Jesus was notorious for keeping company with 'sinners'. We can rest assured that God works with the sin of human beings, and does not take offence at them in the way that we might imagine.

Actual Sin

The term 'actual' is used here to distinguish it from original sin, which is a disordered tendency in the person, but not something for which the person is guilty. Individuals are responsible for their actual sin.

Fasting

Fasting, or abstinence from food for a given period, is a discipline widely practised for reasons of health, both physical and spiritual. The word means to 'hold firmly', in the sense that the one who fasts must keep firm control in order to hold to the observance. Fasting is used in nature to assist creatures in the relief of discomfort, pain, and disease. The temporary absence of food encourages healing. As a spiritual discipline, fasting is encouraged by the Church (and by other religious communities) as a penitential exercise, which restores balance and harmony, and helps a person to put all things into better perspective.

Penance

By the virtue of penance a person is disposed to repent of his or her sin as an offence against self, God and neighbour, and to make a firm purpose of amendment and satisfaction. Repentance implies that a person experiences pain as a result of awareness of this sin, and therefore, in a strong sense, regrets it, or weeps as a result of this awareness. Penance also implies an intention to repair the damage the sin may have caused.

Satan

'Satan' is a Hebrew word meaning adversary or opponent – one who plots against another. In Greek, the word is *diabolos*, literally one who throws (something) across the path of another. Hence our word 'devil'. It is significant to note the connection between this word (*diabolos*), and *symbolos* (symbolos in Greek). The

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first means 'to throw across' and the second 'to throw alongside'. Jesus is the symbol of God, and Satan, the diabolos.

Sin

To sin, trespass, or transgress means to go beyond some imposed limit. The limit may be a law or a boundary, whose crossing implies a guilt to be pardoned or a debt to be settled. In Christian terms sin is to go beyond the law of human nature - to do something that brings a negative consequence.

Structural sin

Personal sin refers to actions that are done on a one-to-one level. It is embedded in the person. Structural sin, on the other hand, is embedded in the laws, institutions or traditions of society, which is typically structured in favour of some people, usually the rich and powerful, at the expense of others - the poor and the marginalised.

LESSON 14: Salvation



FOCUS	Salvation
REFERENCE	<i>The Christian Story</i> (Chapter 6, p.38-40)
GLOSSARY	Salvation, Redemption, Conversion, Fundamentalism, Justification, Body of Christ, Predestination

LESSON SUGGESTIONS [📖 ⇨⇨]

📖 Text

Read the chapter.

⇨ Discussion

Discuss the heart of the matter. Refer to the last sentence on page 39, continuing at the top of page 40, and the last sentence on page 40 itself. Together they read as follows:

*Hence salvation is experienced as belonging to a whole – the **Body of Christ**. It can never be something exclusively individual. In the African awareness, 'I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am.' (Salvation) applies to the human race as a whole, rather than its individual members. But each member has to enter freely into the process of salvation, with the help of God's grace.*

⇨ Response

Now invite learners to make a poster, painting or collage to express their understanding of human salvation. One possible image is suggested by the passage found in the gospel of John (15:4-5)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Do you think fundamentalism in the interpretation of the Bible and the teachings of the Church is a problem in the Church today? What, in your opinion, is the most effective way to deal with such fundamentalists?
- What does it mean to be converted? Do you see this as a process or as an event?
- What are some of the implications of describing salvation as an experience of wholeness?

Lesson Materials



Salvation

✂ God's creative plan breaks the cycle of sin

Why sin is possible, or even necessary, is a mystery. One thing we do know, however, is that sin is possible only because we have free will. God is the only being who cannot, by nature, do evil, for God is goodness itself.

The fact that evil exists does not take away from the goodness of God, but rather reveals his love even more deeply – because in his mercy and providence, God desires to unite us to himself in spite of our sin. God's love overcomes sin so that we can reach our destiny. God's gracious attitude is reflected in the welcome the father gives to his wayward son upon his return: "He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him." (Luke 15:20)

Creation remains radically good in itself even while damaged by sin. Think of an injured or sick body: we regard the ailment as something bad, but we don't regard the ailment as making the body something bad! Creation can be seen as 'fallen', not that it is evil itself, but in that it has been marred and distorted by human agency.

The way that God's purpose is described in Scripture makes it clear that humankind's fulfilment needs Christ even if sin were not in the picture. God's purpose of **salvation** or **redemption** has always been to draw and unite all things together in Christ (Colossians 1:20), and thus has been operative since the beginning of creation. Sin, however, explains why Jesus' task involved suffering and crucifixion. To break the cycle of sin, he had to suffer its destructive power himself. His life is a visible demonstration of God's continuing work of salvation.

✂ Salvation is a gift and a task

The condition of original sin – that is, our inherited disharmony with God's plan – is counteracted by grace. However, we still have to struggle with the effects of original sin – the struggle of **conversion** of life. Grace does, however, enable us to work against these effects.

One of these effects is the appearance of a fragmented world in which all the different parts of creation appear to be separate. In the new heaven and new earth, we will see correctly that all is one: in the Spirit there are no parts that can be separated. Science, as we have seen, already begins to glimpse this in the realisation that everything in the Universe is interconnected and forms a whole, since all has arisen out of an evolutionary process going back to the original event. Creation is destined to experience this oneness consciously in Christ and it will be incomplete until this happens.

We shall not be safe and blessed

Until we abide in peace and love:

this is what salvation means.

And I beheld God as our genuine peace;

he is our protector when we ourselves are disturbed,

and he continually labours to bring us to rest.

Christians inclined to **fundamentalism** sometimes ask the question, "Are you saved?" or "Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour?" We

could reply: “Yes and No: I’m in the process of being saved”. What such Christians seem to be emphasising is the idea of **justification**, an act of God whereby the individual is forgiven unconditionally and enters a right relationship with God. Salvation, or wholeness, of the individual means more than that. It comes about through union with Christ, and this union, like marriage, requires of us not only a promise of commitment, but a constant effort to allow this union to mature (Matthew 7:21). It is like marriage in another respect too. Salvation is “to experience myself as I am, as the desired of God.” This is not to say that salvation is purely an individual affair. More importantly, the salvation of humanity comes about through union *in* Christ. Hence salvation is experienced as belonging to a whole – the **Body of Christ**. It can never be something exclusively individual. In the African awareness, ‘I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am.’ Why union with and in Christ? Because Christ is the meeting point between God and humanity – the gateway, as Jesus described himself (John 10:7). In the person of Jesus the alienation or separation between God and humankind is overcome irrevocably, for he is the one who overcomes the resistance to the movement of the Spirit, which we call sin. In Christ we are united with God in whom we “live and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Brian Gaybba describes salvation in terms of the resurrected life which Jesus inaugurates.

The resurrection is the birth of the fullness of salvation, namely the risen life. In Jesus a human life is completely transformed by the Spirit of Love. It is a life in which there is within it no obstacle to the fullest possible union with God and with the rest of humanity. It is a life in which the power of sin and death, the sign of its victory, are completely overcome... It is a life that is meant to be the ultimate destiny of every human being.

From an evolutionary perspective we can agree with Teilhard de Chardin that Christ is the very meaning of history, the soul of evolution, the end or Omega point, giving it its orientation and direction. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus introduces into our consciousness a new possibility for living, a new way of being human, and through the union we are invited into, we are empowered to make this new way our reality. There are those who think that some people are predestined to be saved and others to be damned. A reading of Paul’s Letter to the Romans (8:28-30), at least in some translations, seems to indicate this as the teaching of Scripture. But this interpretation goes against the general drift of Scripture’s revelation of a God who is loving and compassionate, and desirous of the company of every creature. So a clearer way of understanding the idea of **predestination** is that we are all chosen for salvation: in other words, this is God’s intention for all of us, decided before we ever existed. It applies to the human race as a whole, rather than its individual members. But each member has to enter freely into the process of salvation, with the help of God’s grace.

Body of Christ

The description ‘Body of Christ’ used for the Church emphasises its unity in Christ. This unity is symbolised and made effective by the Church’s members sharing in the Eucharist, the sacrament of Christ’s Life, or Body-and-Blood. The description also points to the Church as the visible presence of Christ in the world.

Conversion

The act of conversion means turning around, or taking a new direction. The Greek word *metanoia* expresses the same idea, but differently. It means ‘a new mind’ or a radical ‘change of mind’ about the meaning of life and the way to live it. In Christian terms, it is acting on the advice of Paul in his letter to the Ephesians to “make your own the mind of Christ Jesus.” (2:5)

Fundamentalism

Fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible starts from the principle that, being the Word of God, and inspired and free from error, it should be read and interpreted literally in all its details. It excludes every effort at understanding the Bible that takes account of its historical origins and development. In a sense, fundamentalism is not a kind of interpretation, but rather a denial of the need for it, since, for the fundamentalist, the Word is seen as absolute, and its message clear and unchanging. However, the fundamentalist, just like any other reader actually does interpret, and tries to make his or her interpretation absolute for all other believers.

Justification

Justification means that God accepts those that have no claim to be accepted – that is, all of us; promises to make sense out of each individual's existence no matter how senseless it may seem; and values every human life however valueless others may regard it.

Predestination

Predestination literally means “a decision made beforehand”. Because God has an eternal loving regard for the human creature, God decides from the very beginning that people should be made sons and daughters, like Christ. This decision does not divide human beings into the lost and the saved: this depends on the choice of the individual to accept or reject God's invitation to love.

Redemption

Redemption is a central idea in Christian theology, though not an easy one to explain. The word means literally ‘a buying back’. It's what I do when I redeem my watch from the pawnbroker. But, in terms of human history, to call Jesus the Redeemer raises a difficult question: If God is said to buy us back, then to whom do we belong? The term ‘redemption’ is used interchangeably with ‘salvation’ (healing, making whole), and ‘atonement’ or ‘reconciliation’ (a return to unity). It may be best to think of redemption as a liberation from one state to another, from bondage, however understood, to liberation.

Salvation

The liberation of the human person from a situation of oppression to a new experience of freedom is variously called ‘salvation’ or ‘redemption’. The idea of salvation suggests healing or making whole – a process, rather than a definitive act, which is the sense that ‘redemption’ (buying back) gives. The Church has never formulated a definitive of salvation or redemption, rather allowing theology to be enriched by these different ways of looking at the significance of the life and action of Jesus in human history.

LESSON 15: Jesus of Nazareth



FOCUS	The Human Jesus
REFERENCE	<i>The Christian Story</i> (Chapter 8, p.44-46)
GLOSSARY	Gospels, Creed, Annunciation, Immaculate Conception, Angelus

LESSON SUGGESTIONS [⇒ 📖 ⇒ 📖 ⇒]

⇒ Exercise

Display the scripture text: “I came from the Father and have come into the world. Now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.” (John 16:28) Invite learners to make a diagram to represent this text, and to share it with the rest of the group. Comment on the diagrams in the light of what you will present later.

📖 Text

Now read “The pattern of Jesus’ life reveals God’s plan.”

⇒ Presentation-Discussion

Now present the diagram on page 45. The movement starts at the top of the circle and goes anti-clockwise back to the top. Give learners time to study it and to comment on it. Make sure they notice the Prologue (the beginning) and the Epilogue (the end).

- In what sense does the pattern reveal God’s plan for every human being?
- What is the place of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in this plan? (Mary is the one through whom Jesus comes from the Father; Jesus is the one through whom Mary and each human being returns to the Father.)

📖 Text

Read the section “God’s word came to live in the world as a human being.”

⇒ Response

Allocate the events in the diagram to individual learners or pairs of learners. Ask them each to find a picture that illustrates their particular event. Make a class collage of the life of Jesus using these pictures.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- If you had been alive at the time of Christ, do you think it would have been easier, or harder, to believe him to be the Son of God?
- How many different ideas about Christ are you aware of among your friends, in your parish, school, or elsewhere?
- Do you think a belief in the virginal conception of Jesus is important for Christian faith?
- If Jesus was fully human, was he capable of sinning?
- Is it true to say that Jesus was ignorant of certain things, and that he sometimes made mistakes?

GRADE 8 Theology

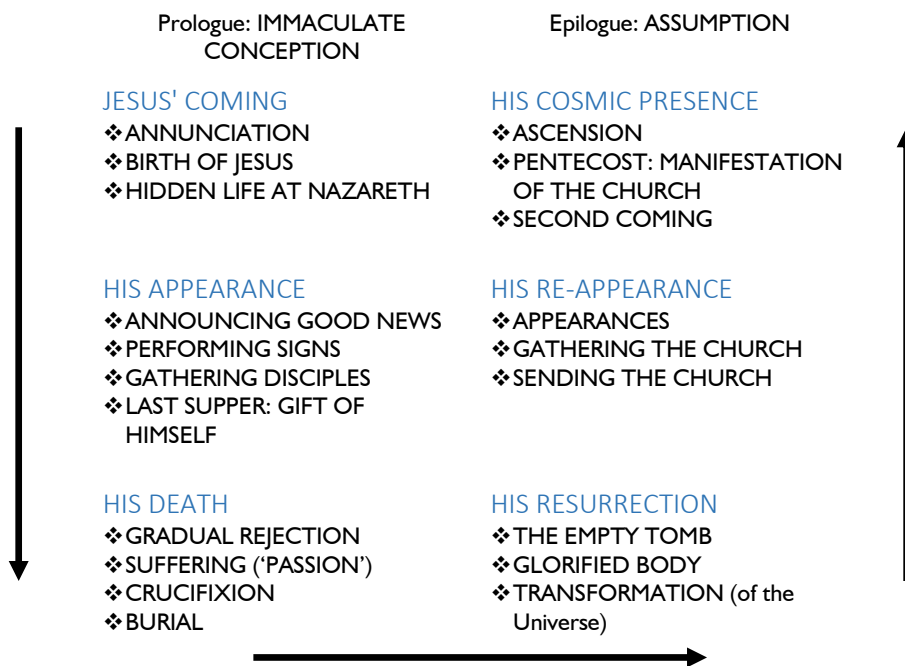
- Did Jesus have sexual desires?
- If it were historically verified that Jesus was married, would it make a significant difference to Christian faith?
- What importance does the church to which you belong give to Mary?
- What aspect of Mary's humanity appeals to you?
- What is the significance of the privileges Mary enjoyed, namely, the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption? (See Glossary entries on pages 158 and 152 respectively.)

Lesson Materials

Jesus of Nazareth

✂ The pattern of Jesus' life reveals God's plan

We can form some picture of the life of Jesus by reading the four **Gospels** of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Instead of retelling the story here, we're going to try to uncover the main phases in the Gospels' account of his life. The better we can see the pattern in the life of Jesus, the better we will be able to see God's plan revealed there. The coming of Christ into the world is the manifestation of God's design that began with Creation. It involves a movement from God into the world: Christ's coming from the Father; and a movement from the world back to God: Christ's return from the world to the Father. In John's Gospel, Christ's life is described in terms of these two grand movements (John 16:28). And if you look closely at the diagram below, you'll find an interesting symmetry between the two movements.



The prologue and epilogue to the life of Jesus reflect the belief that Mary was perfectly saved, or full of grace. She is therefore seen as an image or type of fulfilled humanity and of the Church as sacrament of the Kingdom.

✂ God's Word came to live in the world as a human being

The Christian **Creed** states that Jesus was 'conceived by the Holy Spirit'. We mean that the humanity of Jesus was purely and solely an initiative of God. It is the Spirit who creates this new humanity. The good news of this conception is what the angel announced to Mary in the **Annunciation**. This conception was the beginning of the Word-becoming-flesh, or the Incarnation.

The Creed also says that Jesus was 'born of the Virgin Mary'. A virgin is someone who has never had sexual intercourse. Normally it is not possible to be both a virgin and a mother at the same time, but this is what Christian faith holds about the mother of Jesus.

Professing this belief does not suggest that sex is dirty or undesirable for the friends of God, nor is its purpose to uphold virginity as a better or holier state than marriage. Again, the point is that Jesus was purely an initiative of God, and his conception and birth signalled the beginning of something radically new – in fact, a new creation.

Many people mistakenly think that the *Immaculate Conception* is another term for the Virgin-Birth. Rather, it refers to the beginning of Mary's own life, and not that of Jesus.

Mothers generally have preoccupations and cares of their own which prevent them to some extent from generating an atmosphere of love and acceptance that affirms the child totally and unconditionally. We have already proposed an understanding of original sin as the doubting of our desirability. Mary needed to be freed from this sense of concern so that her son would experience unequivocally his desirability as a child of God. Remember that, as a real human being, Jesus had to struggle just like you and me against limits, ignorance and sin.

This raises another question. Is the Immaculate Conception a special privilege enjoyed only by Mary? She certainly was born into the same world – both graced and sinful – as you and I, but, in some way, she was spared in her inmost being the experience of disorder that inclines a person to sin. However, as a human being with free will, this does not mean that she could not sin.

In mothering the Word of God, she is a symbol of all that the Church is meant to be, and her Immaculate Conception is a symbol of what God's grace does for every human being. Remembering that God's purpose of salvation has been operative since the beginning of creation, and that it is not dependent on the presence or absence of sin, Mary's privilege lies in the way in which she was saved, and not in her not needing it. Furthermore her privilege was not given to elevate her above other human beings, but to equip her for a special service to humankind.

When we pray the *Angelus*, we say that Jesus 'lived among us'. We mean that, in Jesus, God was in touch with every truly human experience – working, learning, loving, laughing, growing, suffering and dying. The list could go on and on: the whole of human experience was taken up into God. Thus, the Incarnation raised our human life to a new dignity. Jesus' many years of hidden life at Nazareth take on a special meaning when we consider what the Incarnation means.

Angelus

The *Angelus* is a traditional Christian prayer, usually said at midday, commemorating the Incarnation. The title of the prayer comes from its first word in the Latin translation of 'The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary...' (*Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae...*)

Annunciation

The *Annunciation*, celebrated on 25th March, exactly nine months before Christmas, is a feast associated with the *Incarnation* - the emptying of God's self to take on human nature. The account in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke narrates the conversation between Mary and the angel Gabriel who announced to her the conception of Jesus.

Creed

A creed may be simply seen as a statement, which summarises the belief of a religious community, but, in practice, it has a deeper, symbolic significance. To recite a creed in a liturgical setting is a confession of faith, and a commitment to live accordingly. Furthermore, while a creed cannot state every detail of belief, it does symbolise the whole content of that faith. In the early Church, the baptismal creed, which we know today as the Apostles' Creed, was known as the *Symbolum Apostolicum* since it functioned as a password or sign or token whereby members of the Christian community could recognise one another.

Gospels

The gospel (*euangelion* or good news) is in the first place an oral text. John the Baptist announces the good news of the coming of Jesus. Jesus announces the good news of the coming of God's Kingdom. The apostles take up Jesus' commission of announcing this to the whole world. When we talk of the gospels, we refer to the four texts written between 30 and 70 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, which were eventually recognised in the canon of Scripture by the Church.

Immaculate Conception

In the Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* of 8 December, 1854, Pius IX pronounced and defined that Mary "in the first instance of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace granted by God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved exempt from all stain of original sin." Mary, the mother of Jesus, was conceived in the natural way, but the manner of her redemption was her privilege. She was able to receive the Word in full cooperation and total freedom, unlike other human beings who struggle to receive it because of the sinful condition into which we are born, the condition called original sin. Mary, the one who is most perfectly redeemed, was filled from the very first with the Holy Spirit, and her whole surrender allowed God to realise the perfect work of his creation. In order for the Word to become incarnate, God needed the full cooperation of the human race, an unconditional "Yes" voiced in freedom, so that redemption would be an act of unconditional love, an invitation not a command, a gift and not some bargaining.