



Credible Catholic

CREDIBLE CATHOLIC

Big Book - Volume 5

CENTRAL DOCTRINES OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH



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Credible Catholic Big Book Volume Five

Central Doctrines of the Catholic Church

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**This Volume supports The Catechism of the Catholic Church,
Part One – The Profession of Faith**

NOTE: All teachings in the **Credible Catholic** materials conform to the **Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)** and help to explain the information found therein. **Father Spitzer** has also included materials intended to counter the viral secular myths that are leading religious people of all faiths, especially millennials, to infer that God is no longer a credible belief. You will find credible documented evidence for God, our soul, the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the Catholic Church, as well as spiritual and moral conversion.

Part One from the CCC is titled, ***THE PROFESSION OF FAITH***. The first 5 Volumes in the *Credible Catholic Big Book* and *Credible Catholic Little Book* fall into Part One. **Part Two** of the CCC is titled, ***THE CELEBRATION OF THE CHRISTIAN MYSTERY***. This is covered in Volumes 6 through 12. **Part Three** of the CCC is ***LIFE IN CHRIST*** and information related to this topic will be found in Volumes 13 through 17. Credible Catholic Big and Little Book Volumes 18 through 20 will cover **Part Four** of the CCC, **Christian Prayer**.

The Big Book can also be divided into two major movements – the rational justification for God, the soul, Jesus, and the Catholic Church (Volumes 1 through 6), and life in Christ through the Catholic Church (Volumes 9 through 20). If you would like a preview of this dynamic, please go to Volume 6 (Chapter 7) at the following link – [Chapter 7 – Where Have We Come From and Where are We Going?](#)

We all need to be Credible Catholics. St. Augustine said in his work, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*,

"Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens and other elements... Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; ...If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven..."

If we don't respond to these secular myths, who will?

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Introduction

This volume addresses several central doctrines of the Church concerned with the Trinity, Jesus, the Virgin birth, and last things. *The Big Book* also covers several other areas of doctrine in different volumes:

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|---|-------------------------------|
| • Doctrines concerning the Church herself | Volume Six |
| • The doctrines of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist | Volume Nine (Chap 1&3) |
| • Doctrines concerned with the sacraments | Volume Ten |
| • Doctrines concerning Marriage | Volume Eleven |
| • Four other Marian doctrines | Vol. Twelve (Chap 4, S.III.B) |
| • Doctrines concerned with moral teachings | Volume Seventeen |

Chapter One

Divine Nature versus Divine Person

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How can Jesus be divine in human form? Isn't that a contradiction? It would be if the early Church had claimed that Jesus' Incarnation was "*divine nature* becoming human nature," or "the divine taking human form," or "the Infinite taking finite form." But it did not, because it was very much aware of the contradiction implied by these statements. Hence, the early Church, reflecting Jesus' preaching, found other forms of expression which avoided these problems. It declared early on that it was not "the infinite divine nature" who became "man," but the "Son of God" who became man.

As the Church developed its doctrine into the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, it worked out a distinction between "person" and "nature." It subsequently declared that the *second Person* of the Trinity (the Son) became human (took finite form). However, it was careful to note that the one, divine, infinite *nature* did *not* become human (finite), because that would have been an obvious contradiction.¹ So what is the distinction between "Person" and "nature"? And why is it that "the Person of the Son taking on a finite nature" is not a contradiction?

¹ It should not be thought that the apostolic Church was altogether ignorant of a distinction between what was later termed "Person" and "nature." Though it did not make a clear, defined distinction between these realities (as did later Church councils), it *implicitly* distinguished between the Father/Son (later termed "Persons") and the divine nature. For example, the Philippians Hymn (Phil. 2:6-11) makes the implicit distinction between "the form of God" (*morphē Theou* – a neo-Platonic precursor to "divine nature") and Jesus Christ (who had the "form of God" and also took on the form of a servant – *morphē doulou*). Similarly, John 1:1-2 makes an implicit distinction between "the Word" (the Son)/*ho Theos* (with the definite article – the Father) – who are divine *persons* -- *and Theos* (without the definite article – "divine *nature*"). See Karl Rahner 1963 "*ho Theos* in the New Testament" in *Theological Investigations* Vol. 1 (Darton, Longman & Todd).

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“Nature” within a Platonic context, refers to the form or essence of a thing. In an Aristotelian context, it refers to the substance (what is not accidental or incidental) or the “*to ti ēn einai*” (the “what it was to be”). Perhaps the easiest way of finding the common ground between these two great ancient Greek traditions is to use the word “power” or “act.” A thing’s nature is the *acting power* which is most central to its being, and allows it to be compared to other beings (making it intelligible and susceptible to definition).

Thus, the “nature of God” would be equivalent to the “acting power of God.” We can know the most fundamental characteristic of the acting power of God through natural reason – namely, that it must be an acting power *existing through itself*. We can prove this because there must be at least one uncaused cause – existing through itself – in order for everything else to exist (see the Thomistic Metaphysical Proof in Volume 1 – Chapter Two – Step#1). We then showed in Steps 2&3 of the Thomistic Metaphysical Proof that there can be *no restriction* in “an acting power existing through itself,” because that restriction could not exist through itself, and would therefore have to be caused. Thus a pure “acting power existing through itself” must be unrestricted.²

In Step 3 of the Thomistic Metaphysical Proof, we showed that an *unrestricted* acting power would have to be *unique* (one and only one), because two unrestricted acting powers is a contradiction.³ We might summarize that Proof as follows: Suppose there are two unrestricted powers. Then one of them would have to have something, or be something, or be somewhere, or be in some other dimension that the other one was *not*. If there were no difference of any kind between the two unrestricted powers – no difference as to power, act, qualities, space-time point, dimension, etc., -- then they would be the *self-same* power – in other words, they would be only *one*.

Now consider the following – if there has to be some difference between the two unrestricted powers (in order for them to be “two”), and that difference requires that one of the “unrestricted” powers *not* have “something,” or *not* be “something,” or *not* be at a particular space-time point, or *not* be in a particular dimension than the one that does have or *is* that “something” -- then the one that does *not* have that “something” must be *finite (restricted)*, because it *lacks* something that the other one has. Therefore, every hypothetical *second* unrestricted power is a contradiction – a “restricted-unrestricted power” – which is, impossible. Hence, there can only be one *unrestricted power* – meaning that there can be only one nature in God. The power/nature of God must be unique.

The Church councils of Nicaea (325 AD) and Chalcedon (451 AD) were well aware that there could be only one unrestricted power – and therefore, one nature in God, and so they knew that they would have to clarify how there could be three “persons” in that one unrestricted

² See the Thomistic Metaphysical Proof in Volume 1 – Chapter Two – Step #2.

³ See the Thomistic Metaphysical Proof in Volume 1 – Chapter Two – Step #3.

power/nature. They were also aware that the one unrestricted power/nature of God could not have become incarnate (i.e., could not have taken on a human or finite form), because that would imply a contradiction -- a “restricted unrestricted reality” or a “finite infinite reality.” The Church never advocated such a contradictory position, but instead advocated that the second *Person* of the Trinity (the Son) became incarnate.

So how might we distinguish the one unrestricted acting power/nature of God from the three persons within that one nature? Recall that the three persons cannot be “unrestricted powers or natures” (implying three Gods), because there can only be one unrestricted power/nature (for the reasons mentioned above). Furthermore, the “three persons” cannot be *parts* within the one unrestricted power/nature of God, because that would imply *restrictions* (to make the parts) within that one *unrestricted* power/nature. So how can we understand “person” so that we do not confuse it with “the one unrestricted acting power/nature of God” or “a part within the one unrestricted acting power/nature of God”? The idea of “*self-consciousness*” has considerable explanatory potential.

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The Church declared the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to be “divine persons.” Jean Galot presents a penetrating explanation of “person” as “the subject of *consciousness* and freedom,”⁴ from which we can provide a basic resolution to the tension in the Christian claim that there are “*three persons in the one God*.” Following Galot’s insight that “person signifies self-consciousness,” we can make a fundamental distinction between the “*one unrestricted acting power (nature) of God*” and the “*three persons* (who may be seen as ‘distinct acts of self-consciousness making use of that one unrestricted power’).” Let us begin with the idea of “person as self-consciousness.”

How might “self-consciousness” be understood? Let us begin with “consciousness.” Consciousness is an act of awareness of, or attention to, a specific content. For example, I am aware of the computer in front of me. Now, when I attend to the computer, everything else within my visual field moves into the background, and my act of consciousness, as it were, moves only the computer (as the only item of interest) into the foreground.

Self-consciousness is awareness of one’s awareness; a consciousness of one’s consciousness, or a grasping of one’s act of grasping. For example, I am not only aware of my computer, I am also aware of being *aware* of my computer. It is as if I doubled back on myself and caught myself catching the computer, or grasped myself grasping the computer.

I can even be aware of being aware of my awareness (that is, aware of my *self-awareness*). Seemingly, I have the power not only to grasp my grasping of the computer, but also to grasp myself grasping myself.

⁴ See Galot 1980, *Who is Christ? A Theology of the Incarnation* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press) p. 284.

This remarkable power seems to defy *physical* explanation, because it can be in two relative positions with respect to itself simultaneously. If we use a spatial analogy to describe it (which cannot describe it perfectly), it would be like my consciousness doubling back on itself at an *infinite* velocity, so that it can be “inside” itself, and even inside itself inside itself.⁵ But my objective here is not to address the specialness of this power of self-awareness or self-consciousness within the world of physical limits, but only to point to the *effects* of this power, namely, its capacity to create an inner world or “inner universe.”

This power enables me to consciously divide the world into two parts: “my inner world,” and “the world out there,” which gives rise to two fundamental drives: to bring the outer world under the control or dominion of my inner world (ego-control), or to invest my inner world in the outer world, that is, to give my inner world over to the good and enhancement of the outer world (love).

Love requires self-consciousness. Recall for a moment that love, according to Jesus, is “gift of self,” and it is evident that I cannot give myself away unless I have appropriated myself, and I cannot appropriate myself unless I am aware of myself. The same holds true for ego-control. If I wish to dominate another, I must first appropriate the “I” which will do the dominating, and this requires self-awareness. Thus, self-awareness might be viewed as a mixed blessing, for it empowers both love and ego-control, the freedom to give oneself away or to impose one’s will on others.

Now, let us return to the matter of the Trinity. As noted earlier, there can be *only one* unrestricted power, but Christian revelation holds that there are three persons in this one power. If we follow the clue given by Jean Galot and associate “person” with “self-consciousness,” then we might say that there are three distinct acts of self-consciousness sharing in the one unrestricted power/nature. This is not contradictory because an unrestricted power can accommodate multiple acts of self-consciousness. We might characterize this as three distinct acts of self-consciousness (Father, Son, and Spirit) making an unconditional use of the one unrestricted acting power. The one unrestricted acting power acts as a single “power source” for the three distinct acts of self-consciousness. Notice that the Church is not postulating three unrestricted powers (which would be intrinsically contradictory), but only one unrestricted power of which the three distinct acts of self-consciousness are making an unconditional use.

⁵ For the proofs of this, see Volume Two, Chapter 5,

Chapter Two

The Holy Trinity

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What are these three distinct acts of self-consciousness doing (according to Christian revelation)? In addition to making an unconditional use of the one unrestricted power (nature), they are in *love*. The clue to this is found in the Father's twofold name for the Son, "This is my Son, my beloved one (*ho agapētos*)..."⁶ The reader will notice the familiar root "*agapē*" in "*ho agapētos*" ("the beloved one"). Inasmuch as the three distinct acts of self-consciousness are capable of making an unconditional use of the one infinite power source, they are also capable of three distinct *unconditional* acts of love.

If the Son's core identity is "the Beloved One," then it stands to reason that the Father's core identity is "the Lover of the Beloved One." The Father (the first act of self-consciousness⁷) loves the Son (the Beloved One – the second act of self-consciousness) in an *unconditional* way, because this is commensurate with His unconditional use of the one unrestricted power.

When the Son (the Beloved – the second act of self-consciousness) receives the love of the Father, He is completely aware of the goodness and beauty of the Father's love, and responds to the Father with all His love (which includes the love arising out of His being beloved by the Father). Like the Father, the Son is making an unconditional use of the one infinite power; so His act of love is also unconditional. Thus, the two Persons form a unity of interpersonal love through the one unrestricted power (nature). The Father is a "giver-receiver," while the Son is a "receiver-giver."

But what about the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit (the third distinct act of self-consciousness) is also a beloved, but not simply the beloved of *either* the Father *or* the Son. The Spirit is beloved of the *union* between the Father and the Son.⁸

⁶ See the use of *ho agapētos* (the "beloved one") as the Father's name for Jesus in the Baptism and Transfiguration stories of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Mt 3:17, Mt 17:5, Mk 1:11, Mk 9:7, Lk 3:22, Lk 20:13. John's gospel elaborates this -- "The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand" (Jn 3:35); "For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing" (Jn 5:20); "Just as the Father has loved Me..." (Jn 15:9); "...You [Father] sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me" (Jn 17:23); "...for You [Father] loved Me before the foundation of the world" (Jn 17:24); "...I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them" (Jn 17:26). This is confirmed by Jesus' self-reference as "the beloved son" in the parable of the Wicked Vintners (Lk 20:13). Note also St. Paul's many references to the love between the Father and the Son. In Romans 5:8, he shows the love between the Father and the Son in the love given to us in Christ's sacrificial death: "...[The Father] shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Again, in Romans 8:39, the love between the Father and the Son is manifest in the love of God which cannot be separated from us in Christ: "...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God [the Father] in Christ Jesus our Lord."

⁷ "First" here does not refer to "first in *time*," because God is not in time (see the Thomistic Metaphysical proof of God for the proof of the transtemporality of God in Volume 1, Chapter 2, Step 7). "First" refers to the processional status within a loving relationship. This is explained below in this section.

⁸ John strongly implies this in Jesus' final discourse with his disciples -- "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever -- the Spirit of truth... for he lives with you and will *be in*

How does the union of the Father and the Son love? Love always acts beyond itself. When love is from an individual, it is termed “gift of self;” but love need not be only an outpouring of *self*; it can also be an outpouring of an “*us*” (that is, a union among selves). This occurs in marriage where a couple can give its “*us*” (its collective self) to another person by welcoming that person into the relationship. One can generally tell when a couple has this loving quality as a relational whole because their invitation is harmonious and welcoming. If this loving quality of the “*us*” is not there, or if there is a problem causing a disruption of the relationship, it is immediately discernable. But when this quality is present, it constitutes a new relationship between the “*us*” and another beloved. When this other beloved receives the love of the “*us*,” he returns it (much like a child or a friend) to the union (the *collective* self) -- not merely to the *individual* selves (separately). When a child, for example, reflects love back to his parents, it is qualitatively different than reflecting it back to one parent or another (independently of their relationship). The Holy Spirit, then, is the “beloved of the union between the Father and the Son.” The Spirit is welcomed into the love of their relationship, and reflects this love back to them (in their relationship to one another). The Holy Spirit completes the timeless loving relationship within the Trinity just as a child completes the loving relationship within a family. Just as a child brings fulfillment and joy to the parents (through their love for the child), so also the love of the Holy Spirit brings completion and joy to the love of the Father and the Son (through their love of the Spirit).

Therefore, when Christians say that God is love, they do not mean only that the attribute of love belongs to the one infinite nature of God; they mean that there is real *interpersonal* love (gift of self and gift of the “*us*”) taking place through three perfect acts of self-consciousness, making unconditional use of the one unrestricted power.

you... On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you... *We* will come to them and make *our* home with them...” (Jn 14:16-23). Notice the parallel between “the Spirit being *in* the disciples” and the “Father and the Son being *in* the disciples,” implying that the Spirit proceeds from the love between the Father and the Son.

St. Paul also implies that the Spirit proceeds from the love of the Father and the Son. In Romans 5:5, Paul shows the unity of the Father and the Spirit through the love poured into our hearts: “[The *Father's*] love has been poured into our hearts through the *Holy Spirit* which has been given to us”; in Galatians 5:22-24, he shows the unity between Christ and the Holy Spirit in the overcoming of the desire of the flesh: “...the fruit of the *Spirit* is love... And those who belong to *Christ Jesus* have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” But Paul goes beyond the unity of Father and Spirit, and the unity of Christ and Spirit. He shows that the unity between the Father and the Son is also in loving union with the Spirit (Romans 15:30): “I appeal to you, brethren, by our *Lord Jesus Christ* and by the love of the *Spirit*, to strive together with me in your prayers to [the *Father*].”

Chapter Three

The Incarnation

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As implied above, the Incarnation does not mean that the one unrestricted power/nature of God became human (finite/restricted), because that would be intrinsically contradictory. Rather, Christian tradition declares that the second *Person* (*self-consciousness* -- making an unconditional use of the one unrestricted power/nature) entered into a finite human nature.

Self-consciousness can act through either an infinite nature or a finite nature, but it will take on the conditions of the power or nature in which it inheres. If self-consciousness inheres (makes use of) a finite nature, it will be subject to the limitations of that nature. However, if self-consciousness inheres in (makes use of) an *unrestricted* power/nature, then there is no limit to the power of its understanding, creativity, freedom, and will.

Thus, when the *Son* (second self-consciousness) makes use of his unrestricted nature, his acts of understanding, creativity, and will are similarly unrestricted. However, when the Son inheres in a finite nature (appropriated after the Incarnation), His understanding, creativity, and will are limited by the restrictions of that finite nature.

For this reason, Christianity holds that Jesus Christ, after the Incarnation, is *one Person* (one self-consciousness having one inner domain from which free acts can arise) who makes use of *two natures* – one unrestricted and the other restricted. Hence, the one Person of the Son is both true God and true man.

Christianity holds that the second Person (self-consciousness) did not stop using the divine nature when He took on the limitations of human nature, but rather continued operating through His divine nature so that the one self-consciousness had the perspective, understanding, and will of *both* an unrestricted nature and a restricted/finite nature.

One might ask the question how a single self-consciousness could have two such different perspectives. One analogy that comes to mind is our dream state, but I hesitate to use it, because it presents so many dis-analogous elements. If one bears in mind that the Incarnation is not anything like a human dream state, but a human dream state illustrates how one self-consciousness can have two different perspectives, then perhaps the analogy may render some benefit.

When I am dreaming, my self-consciousness (self-awareness) does not exit out of my material body. Rather, while present to my “real world body,” my self-consciousness enters into a dream world with states and laws quite different from the physical world. I might be able to fly, run the 100 yard dash in less than 9 seconds (not likely in my condition within the physical world), and even quarterback better than Joe Montana. I can feel fear and elation within that world which is not commensurate with anything going on in the physical world. Nevertheless, the fear seems quite real, even when my self-consciousness experiences it in the dream world.

One might use this analogy (recognizing its limitations) to think of the second Person (self-consciousness) in the Trinity. While still using His unrestricted power, He enters into His thought of creation, and takes on the particularity of Jesus of Nazareth. The self-consciousness of the Son does not have to stop using His infinite nature in order to enter into the perspective of a finite nature any more than my self-consciousness has to leave my physical body in order to enter into a dream world with altogether different laws and perspectives.

The Trinity, Incarnation, and God's Unconditional Love

If the above analysis has not thoroughly confused the reader, consider three essential themes which show how Jesus' revelation of the Trinity and Incarnation connect with his (and the Father's) unconditional love:

- 1) The Trinity is the interpersonal love taking place among three Persons (self-consciousnesses) making an unconditional use of the one unrestricted, divine power (nature). These three Persons relate to each other as follows: the Father loves the Son, while the Son receives the love of the Father and returns it to Him. The loving relationship between the Father and the Son constitutes a unity, which unity gives itself to another beloved (the Spirit) who receives the love of the Father and the Son (in their unity), and returns it to them (collectively).
- 2) Jesus-Emmanuel is not the one unrestricted *nature* of God becoming human (finite). Rather, He is the second Person (*self-consciousness* – the Son – the Beloved) of the Trinity entering into a finite human nature.
- 3) The reason why the second Person of the Trinity entered human nature was to achieve a face-to-face, peer-to-peer relationship with humanity – a perfect act of empathy arising out of his *unconditional love*. Why else would the second self-consciousness subject Himself to finitude, transitoriness, and pain⁹ when He could have avoided these restrictions and sufferings by remaining within the infinite divine nature alone? Only the “logic of *unconditional love*” can explain this self-sacrifice, which he turns into *complete* self-sacrifice through his passion and death.

Thus it seems that the interpersonal love of the Trinity desires to move out of itself into the domain of creatures through the person of the Beloved, who can make us co-beloveds in His union with the Father and the Spirit, and can give us His Spirit to course through our community and bring that community back to the Father as perfect gift. This is the logic of love, or better, the logic of *unconditional love*.

⁹ Self-emptying, *kenosis* – Philippians 2:7.

Chapter Four

The New Testament Background of the Incarnation

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Some readers may be thinking that the above systematic explanation of the incarnation – the one person (self-consciousness) of Jesus within His two natures – His unrestricted divine nature and His restricted human nature came from the Councils of Nicaea, Chalcedon, and Constantinople rather than the New Testament. Though it is true that the Councils made refinements about the doctrine of the incarnation and the person and natures of Jesus¹⁰, they did not conceive of these dogmas “out of thin air.” They were heavily reliant upon the New Testament – particularly the early Christological Hymns that we will explore below. As will be seen, the idea of two natures in Jesus’ person is more than implicit in these Hymns. Early as these hymnic expressions were, they gave explicit guidance to the fathers of the above Christological Councils resulting in the doctrines we explained above (in Chapters 1 through 3).

As noted in Volume 3, the scriptural foundations for Jesus’ divinity and humanity are sewn throughout the New Testament. The five most prevalent foundations are:

1. Jesus’ resurrection in glory, manifesting divinity (see Volume 3, Chapter Five).
2. Jesus’ gift of the Holy Spirit -- the power of God – “*Dunamis Tou Theou*” (Volume 3, Chapter Seven).
3. Jesus’ miracles by His own authority (Volume 3, Chapter Six).
4. Jesus’ self-proclamation to be the Exclusive Son of the Father – “knowing the Father as the Father knows Him” (Volume 4, Chapter Six).
5. The apostles ability to do miracles in the name of *Jesus* – if Jesus were not who He said He was, then God would not allow miracles to be worked in His name (Volume 3, Chapter Seven).

The certainty of the apostles about Jesus’ divinity was so great that they sacrificed their religious status, social status, and financial status – and in the end, gave their lives to proclaim Him as “the Lord” (“*Ho Kurios*”) and “the Son of God.” As noted in Volume 3, this proclamation was not only at the cost of everything worldly, but it was also apologetically *unappealing* – losing many potential converts to the early Church. Why would they have done this, when they could have proclaimed Him a “martyr prophet,” “God’s holiest one,” or “the Messiah” without any of these sacrifices? It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the early Church was completely convinced that He was indeed the Son of God.

As noted above, the clearest, most explicit and comprehensive statements of the union of Jesus’ divine and human nature are found in some of the earliest writings in the New Testament – the Christological Hymns. Four of these hymns are of particular importance:

¹⁰ For the precise refinements made by these Councils in Christological doctrine, see J.N.D. Kelly 1978 *Early Christian Doctrine* (New York: Harper One) pp. 233-247 (Nicaea) pp. 257-269 (development of Trinitarian doctrine), and pp. 284-343 (for Athanasius and the Council of Chalcedon and final Christological resolutions).

1. Philippians 2: 6-11 (particularly Phil. 2: 6-7).
2. John 1: 1-3, 14.
3. Colossians 1: 15-17.
4. Hebrews 1:2-3.

The first hymn is the most extensive and metaphysically developed, and so we will focus on it below, but readers who wish to examine the full range of these remarkable precursors to the Creed will want to read the *Jerome Biblical Commentary* on the other three hymns.

Who are the authors of these very nuanced creedal and theological statements? Even though these hymns are recounted by two different biblical authors -- Paul and John -- they were composed by other authors *prior* to Paul's Letter to the Philippians and the Gospel of John.¹¹ They were probably composed quite early in the apostolic Church (the Philippians Hymn, for example, appears to have an early Palestinian background¹²).

The composers of these hymns were probably well-educated, early converts to Christianity. They all seemed to have been quite familiar with Wisdom literature (particularly Wis 7:21ff, 8:1ff, 9:9ff; Sir 1:4, 24:9; Prov 8:27ff). They may have had a scribal background and may have belonged to Wisdom schools. At the very least, they would have been influenced by Wisdom speculation. As such, they would have been familiar with Old Testament thought, Jewish literature, *as well as* Hellenistic thought (since later Wisdom literature, such as the Book of Wisdom, was heavily influenced by Hellenistic thought). They may also have had a rudimentary familiarity with Plato or platonic thought. Thus, they were capable of blending Jewish and Greek conceptual structures, and adapting the constructs of Wisdom literature to initiate the theological reflection process on Jesus' divinity and incarnation.

In view of the fact that the Philippians Hymn had rather early Palestinian origins, the early apostolic Church's proclamation and understanding of the divinity of Christ cannot be underestimated. Its early scribal converts had produced a very sophisticated and extensive development of this doctrine, making use of biblical, Jewish, and Hellenistic thought.

The Philippians Hymn (2:6-11) makes an explicit reference to Jesus' pre-incarnate divinity, and strongly implies (if not explicitly asserts) a co-eternal and co-equal sharing of divine status with the Father. In view of this hymn's early origins (in pre-Pauline Palestine), one can see how extensively the doctrine of Jesus' divinity and incarnation had developed in the early apostolic Church. It might be translated as follows:

¹¹ With respect to all four hymns, see Jack Sanders 2004 *The New Testament Christological Hymns: Their Historical Religious Background* (Cambridge University Press) pp. 1-25.

With respect to the Johannine Hymn, see Vawter 1969 "The Gospel of John" in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall) p. 421.

With respect to the Philippians Hymn, see Brendan Byrne 1990 "The Letter to the Philippians" in the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Prentice Hall) p. 794, and also Joseph Fitzmyer 1968 "The Letter to the Philippians" in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Prentice Hall) p. 250.

With respect to the Colossians Hymn, see Grassi 1968 "The Letter to the Colossians" in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Prentice Hall) p. 337.

¹² See Joseph Fitzmyer 1988 "The Aramaic Background of Philippians 2:6-11." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 50, pp. 470-483.

[Jesus], subsisting in the form [nature] of God [from all eternity]
 did not deem equality with God
 something to be held onto
 but emptied Himself
 taking the form [nature] of a slave,
 becoming identical to a man (2:6-7)....

It may be helpful to consider certain features of the Greek grammar and syntax to show the degree of care taken in this hymn to explain Jesus' divine and human natures. Let us begin with the first verse – "[Jesus], subsisting (*huparchōn*) in the form [nature of God]." The present participle, "*huparchōn*," is a technical term which means more than "existing." *Huparcho* denotes existence with implications of "remaining in being" or "at the foundation or source of being" (subsisting). The root "*arche*" which can mean "beginning" or "source" takes on a dimension of "eternity" when set in the context of "the form [nature] of God." Notice that "*huparchōn*" is a participle, signifying that Jesus' "being in the form of God" continues – it does not cease when He takes on the form of a slave.

How should we interpret "the form (*morphē*) of God"? Though the term "*morphē*" commonly means "outward appearance," it can sometimes indicate "an outward appearance manifesting the inner substance."¹³ There is a debate about the suitability of the second definition – "outward appearance manifesting the inner substance" – which is a far less common meaning of "*morphē*," though many exegetes believe that this meaning is warranted because the author of the hymn goes on to specify that Jesus had *equality* with God. The literal Greek here "*to einai isa Theō*" – "the to be equal with God." This context suggests that the author is here speaking about the substance of God, and not just His appearance. Moreover, the idea of emphasizing God's outward appearance is highly unusual in a Jewish context (and this hymn seems to have had a Palestinian origin). In view of this, it is not unwarranted to translate "*morphē*" as "nature" – the "appearance that manifests the inner substance."

The hymn continues, stating that "he emptied himself." Emptied ("*ekenōsen*") is in the aorist tense – signifying a particular past moment in time. Notice the contrast between the participle "*huparchōn*" ("subsisting from eternity") which has a continuative or ongoing meaning, and the aorist of "emptied" which occurs only at one particular moment.

The author goes on to say that when Jesus "emptied Himself, He took on the form (*morphē*) of a slave/servant (*doulou*)." Does "*morphē*" here again mean "nature"? It seems so, because, as above, it is further specified by the following phrase – "becoming identical to a man." Some readers may have seen the translation -- "being born in the likeness of man," but this translation is misleading. The Greek word frequently translated as "likeness" is "*homoioōma*" – which can mean either "identical copy" or "mere resemblance."¹⁴ Brendan Byrne explains that the former meaning – "identical copy"-- "is most likely intended here, bringing out the paradox of the 'Godlike and hence Immortal One taking on *full human existence* with its destiny in

¹³ Strong's Exhaustive Concordance (#3444) "*morphē*" <http://biblehub.com/greek/3444.htm>

¹⁴ See Brendan Byrne 1990 "The Letter to the Philippians" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* p. 795.

death.”¹⁵ In this context, the term “*morphē*” likely means the “*nature* of a slave – a powerless nature.”

Notice the use of the two participles to describe how Jesus becomes His new nature – the “nature of a slave which is identical to that of a man.” “*Labōn*” (“taking”) accompanies “the form of a slave” and “*Genomenos*” (“becoming”) accompanies “identical with a man.” As noted above, participles indicate a continuative or ongoing state (in contrast to the punctuate past moment when Jesus emptied Himself). The implication is that Jesus’ human nature continues just as His Divine Nature continues (after His self-emptying).

Let us now restate the hymn with the above considerations in mind:

[Jesus], subsisting in the nature of God [from all eternity]
did not deem equality with God
something to be held onto
but emptied Himself
taking the nature of a slave,
becoming identical to a man (2:6-7)....

When we consider the very careful use of technical terms, such as “*Huparchōn*,” “*to einai isa Theō*,” and “*morphē*” (with its subsequent clarifications) and the use of participles to describe the ongoing states of Jesus’ divine nature and human nature, we may conclude that the scriptural foundation for the co-existence of Jesus’ two natures in His person after His incarnation is quite strong. The explanation for this doctrine is given in Chapters 1 through 3 above.

Chapter Five The Virginal Conception of Jesus

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I once had a student who insisted that a virginal conception of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God was simply too much to accept – it seemed to belong more properly to an ancient myth than to any imaginable plan that the real God could have for humanity. I could see how his images of God and the scenario of a virginal conception seemed to be in conflict. Why would an all-powerful God use this means to come into the world?

When I tried to answer his question, it turned into a dialogue consisting of eight steps:

1. The Trinity is intelligible and explicable.

If you can’t believe that there can be three persons (self-consciousnesses) participating in one unrestricted act of existing and thinking (the one nature of God), then we may as well stop right here because the incarnation of the Son is not going to make any sense if one cannot believe in a second person (self-consciousness) participating in the one divine nature. Therefore, I carefully explained

¹⁵ Ibid.

each point in the explanation and justification of the Trinity given above in Chapters 1&2. If one accepts that there can be three persons participating in the one nature of God, then proceed to the second step.

2. *The Incarnation of the Son is intelligible and explicable.*

The main stumbling block for most non-Christians is the failure to understand what is meant by the “Incarnation.” Many mistakenly believe that this means that the infinite nature of God somehow becomes finite – which is obviously contradictory. This is not what is meant by “the Incarnation,” but rather that the second self-consciousness participating in the one infinite nature of God, projects His whole consciousness into a finite body in a particular place and time of His creation. This is no more impossible than a human being projecting his self-awareness into a dream world which is quite distinct from the real world of his embodiment. Therefore I carefully explain to him the argument given above in Chapter 3 to show the feasibility of this proposal.

3. *Why would there be three persons in the one Divine Nature?*

Many outstanding philosophy students balk at the need for a Trinity of persons in God, because there seems to be complete sufficiency and perfection in the one unrestricted act of being and thinking – therefore three self-consciousnesses participating in this one act of being and thinking seems superfluous. This is not the case, because if there is only one self-consciousness in the one unrestricted act of being and thinking, it would be radically alone – one might say, radically lonely and radically incomplete. Since it is not a contradiction to assert that more than one self-consciousness can participate in the one unrestricted act of being and thinking (shown above in Step 1), then it is possible to have *three* self-consciousnesses participating in the one unrestricted act of thinking and being. Further, since unrestricted being and thinking would seem to be ontologically and *interpersonally* complete (in its unrestrictedness), the three distinct self-consciousnesses (needed for interpersonal completeness) would seem to belong *by nature* to the one unrestricted act of being and thinking. This interpersonal nature may be seen in terms of love – the first person (self-consciousness) being the lover, the second person being the beloved (the precise name used to describe Jesus in the transfiguration and the Parable of the Wicked Tenants), and the third person being the beloved of “the union of the lover and the beloved.” This was explained above in Chapters 1&2.

4. *Why would the three divine persons (self-consciousnesses) want the second person to become incarnate?*

It seems that there could have been an easier way to love and redeem humanity than having the second person become incarnate. From the vantage point of Jesus’ revelation, however, there was no “easier way.” The three divine persons created human beings to be in an eternal and unconditionally loving relationship with them, realizing that this would require human freedom (without which participation in unconditional love would be impossible). Realizing that humanity would fall and would struggle to stay on the road to love – to choose other centeredness over self-centeredness, compassion over domination, and worship of the true God over self-worship – they planned before all creation to enter into the human condition (through the second beloved person) to bring about three redemptive conditions:

- To unconditionally love humanity (not just in word or intention, but in concrete action) by complete self-sacrifice – accepting the restrictedness of the human condition and then suffering torment and death. Thus, they would create an unrestricted act of love which could outshine and

redeem all human darkness and sinfulness. Moreover, it would unconditionally guarantee the three persons' willingness to do anything to bring human beings (who are open to the divine path to love) into that eternal loving salvation in them.

- To teach humanity not only in word, but in action and being, what the path to love consists in. Thus, in this way Jesus' final commandment (in John) could be fulfilled, "Love one another as I have loved you."
- To have the second person of the Trinity – through his risen embodiment – become the unity and mediator of all the members of the Church (and the communion of saints) for all eternity – a perduring act of unitive love. This would only be possible through incarnation in the created world.

Thus, in their unconditional act of love for humanity, the three divine persons decided to enter into the created world (through the beloved second person – the Son) to interpersonally, intimately, and completely redeem all human beings who desire to be with them and open themselves to them.

5. *Why would the three divine persons want to enter into humanity through a virginal conception?*

My student gradually came to accept the above four steps because they made sense both logically and lovingly. As he indicated, "if I keep remembering to see everything through the filter of unconditional love, the incarnation makes sense." However, he then added, "But I don't get the need for a virginal conception – this seems to me to be some 'add-on' from the Church to accommodate its fear of sex." I assured him that the need for a virginal conception had nothing to do with the Church's "fear of sex." Indeed, the Church encourages covenant love through sexual consummation in marriage and family. Yet this does not really address the issue – because the virginal conception is not about sex or virginity *per se*, but about the father of Jesus. The reason why Mary had to be a virgin was because she could not have relations with a man if God was to be Jesus' Father.

My student objected by saying, "if the divine second person becomes incarnate, and He is interpersonally related to the Father, then it would seem that Joseph could be his human father because his true father would still be the first divine person to whom he is divinely related.

I responded that this may seem acceptable at first glance, but that he should really think about what he was saying. Could Jesus really have two fathers – his divine Father and Joseph – a human father who would contribute his genetic material to Jesus' human nature? Beyond the immense filial confusion this would cause, there is the problem that Joseph's genetic contribution might not be ideally compatible with the incarnate Son's relationship to His divine Father. If Joseph had contributed genetically to the formation of Jesus' brain (by making his genetic contribution), and Jesus' divine Father contributed to his interpersonal consciousness, there may not simply be the problem of non-ideal compatibility, but the problem of incompatibilities, and even a bifurcated consciousness (with respect to his filial identity). There is only one solution if such problems are to be avoided – Jesus' divine Father will have to create the ideal genetic contribution to be united with that of Mary to bring about the physical embodiment in which Jesus' divine self-consciousness would be infused. If Jesus' divine Father was to be his *only* natural father, God would have to create the genetic contribution to be united with Mary's – and this would have to entail a virginal conception. This is the true reason for the virginal conception – not the Church's preference for virginity, a difficulty about Mary having relations with Joseph, or a difficulty with Jesus being born through a carnal

relationship. Jesus needed to have one natural father – and that would have to be his father from all eternity – His Divine Father.

6. *The early Church – let alone Mary and Joseph – certainly did not understand the idea of genetic contribution, bifurcated consciousness, and brain physiology – so how did they come up with the idea of a virginal conception?*

When my student asked this question, I had to grin because the answer was fairly clear – they didn't come up with the *idea* of a virginal conception. This was the *reality* that was revealed by God to Mary and subsequently to Joseph, and the *reality* that she lived when she conceived without having relations with a man. It is this *reality* that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus confirm to the apostles and early Church that gave rise to the strong early Palestinian tradition reflected in the Infancy Narratives of both Matthew and Luke (explained below). The doctrine of the virginal conception was maintained in the Church throughout the centuries – and explained in terms of the Divine Father's sole paternity over His Incarnate Son. Obviously this explanation did not extend into the areas of genetics, brain physiology, and bifurcated consciousness until the 20th Century when these discoveries were incorporated into contemporary theological reflection. They serve only to enhance – and not to deter from -- the arguments for the sole paternity of Jesus' divine Father – and therefore of a virginal conception.

7. *Nevertheless, God creating the male genetic contribution to Jesus' human nature seems a little far-fetched.*

When my student brought up this point, I said to him, “Look – if you can believe that the second divine person would become incarnate out of unconditional love for humanity, why is it so difficult to believe that He would create the male genetic material needed for sole paternity at the same time His Son became incarnate? There is nothing contradictory – logically incoherent -- about this assertion, because Jesus' divine Father is perfectly capable of creating the male genetic contribution to His Son's human nature. So the question really isn't, “Could God do this?” But rather, “Why *would* God do this?” And that question has already been answered – because the three divine person's unconditional love for humanity could only find its perfect fulfillment in the perfect self-sacrifice of incarnation and death, leading to the love, teaching, and mediation needed for human redemption and eternal happiness. This incarnation required sole paternity by Jesus' divine Father, and this in turn required a virginal conception.

8. *How can we be so sure about the scriptural testimony to the virginal conception?*

This was my student's final question. He had read that certain parts of the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke might be fanciful additions to the gospel texts. I answered as follows.

Although it is true that Matthew and Luke could make redactional additions to their texts for purposes of catechetical or theological clarification, it is highly unlikely that they would have created something out of thin air. There is no evidence of anything like this in the gospel texts. The evangelists are very careful to seek oral traditions grounded in history as the basis for the stories in their narratives. We use historical criteria to identify the primitive texts of those oral traditions and to reveal catechetical and theological redactions (see Volume 7, Chapters 1&2, and Volume 8, Chapter 1). Historical criteria have been applied to the Infancy Narratives, and the virginal conception is found to have strong historicity (see

below, Chapter Six). A thorough study of these criteria is beyond the scope of this question, but one criterion – multiple attestation – is important.

The Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke are quite different because the former focuses on Joseph while the latter focuses on Mary. In that sense, they are complementary. Amidst the obvious differences, there are four points of agreement. All of which concern the virginal conception:

- (i) Mary` did not have relations with a man – i.e. Joseph (Mt. 1:18, 25 and Lk. 1: 34).
- (ii) The conception of Jesus takes place through the Holy Spirit (Mt. 1:18, 20 and Lk. 1:35).
- (iii) Jesus' true Father is the first divine person (Mt. 1: 23 and Lk. 1: 35).
- (iv) Jesus is the incarnate Son of God – Emmanuel (Mt. 1:23 and Lk. 1:35).

There are other similarities – such as the name of Jesus and his birth in Bethlehem – but these four core similarities point directly to the virginal conception of Jesus.

Evidently, there are two early Palestinian traditions that form the basis of Matthew's and Luke's narratives. Luke's tradition may have been grounded in the testimony of Mary herself. It is more difficult to link Matthew's tradition to Joseph. Nevertheless, these two distinct oral traditions have the above four core similarities all related to the virginal conception. Mary was well-known to the apostles (see Acts 1:14) – and to the evangelists – and it is difficult to believe that these four critical similarities could have made their way into the earliest oral traditions about Jesus' birth without having Mary as their ultimate source and confirmation. Since it would be very difficult to believe that Mary could have been mistaken or deceitful about her virginal conception, it is reasonable to believe that this is precisely what happened.

In sum, the virginal conception of Jesus makes perfect sense when viewed through the lens of the unconditional interpersonal love among the three persons of the Trinity. When that love is extended to fallen transcendental creatures in a fallen world, the most loving response of the Trinity was to allow the second person to become incarnate while maintaining paternity in His divine Father alone. Thanks to the humility and obedience of Mary, the virginal conception needed for the incarnation of the divine Son took place – and through it, we have been redeemed.

Chapter Six

Further Reflections on Jesus' Conception and the Virgin Birth

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As noted above, it is highly improbable that the two vastly different Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke could have almost identical views and expressions for Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit, for the virgin birth, and Jesus' implied divinity without having an early Palestinian common tradition – perhaps originating with Mary herself. Yet the contemporary world is fraught with challenges to the historicity of the virgin birth, because it seems too fanciful or an attempt on the part of Christians to imitate pagan divine heroes who were also reputed to have been born of virgins – such as Augustus and Hercules. In an excellent article entitled “Suspending Scepticism: History and the Virgin Birth,” N.T. Wright redresses these concerns and makes a probative case for the historicity of conception by the Holy Spirit and the virgin birth.

Wright is undisturbed by minor challenges presented by some modern critics. For example, did Matthew make up the virgin birth so that it would correspond to Isaiah's prophecy, “the virgin shall conceive and bear a son” (Is. 7:14) – after all, Matthew focuses on Jesus as the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies. Wright responds that might be tenable, if Luke had not also attested to Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit and the virgin birth for completely different reasons (not even mentioning this or other prophecies).¹⁶ Again, some have objected that certain dimensions of Matthew's Infancy Narrative *may* not be historical – such as the star, the astrologers, or Herod's massacre. Similarly, questions have been raised about Luke's census and the shepherds (that Matthew does not mention). Wright responds simply that unusual events (such as the star) and single attestation do not and cannot sustain a verdict of non-historicity – “As with most ancient history, of course, we cannot verify independently that which is reported only in one source. If that gives grounds for ruling it out, however, most of ancient history goes with it.”¹⁷ Moreover, several astronomical studies indicate a strong possibility for a peculiar celestial phenomenon – a conjunction of Jupiter, Venus, and the star Regulus – that would have resembled the described phenomenon at the time of Jesus' birth (starting in September of 3 B.C. and concluding June 2 B.C.).¹⁸ Furthermore, Herod's malicious conduct is completely consistent

¹⁶ N.T. Wright, 2011, “Suspending scepticism: History and the Virgin Birth” in *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Religion and Ethics* (<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2011/12/28/3398969.htm>).

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Astronomer Dave Reneke who is the editor of *Sky and Space* Magazine developed software that showed that this conjunction produced a spectacular event around the end of 3 B.C. See “Astronomer Dave Reneke believes he has solved the Star of Bethlehem mystery,” 2009, in News Corp Australia Network (<http://www.news.com.au/news/software-solves-star-of-bethlehem-riddle/news-story/cadda197482c07d16c170bb15069407e>).

See also astrophysicist Brian Koberlein who seriously considers the conjunction phenomenon as a likely scenario. See “The Astronomy Behind The Star of Bethlehem” in *Forbes* in December 19, 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/briankoberlein/2016/12/19/the-astronomy-behind-the-star-of-bethlehem/#2f3558075896>.

See also Craig Chester, “The Star of Bethlehem” *Imprimis* December 1993. Vol. 22, no. 12.

with his character as noted repeatedly in Josephus' *Antiquities*, and the time of Herod's death as previously calculated by Emil Schürer from Josephus' *Antiquities* may well have been erroneous. A recalculation by Andrew Steinmann in 2009 makes a very compelling case.¹⁹ Finally, much work has been done on the possible meaning of the census of Quirinius in Luke. According to Jack Finegan, the reference may be to a census of allegiance to Caesar (done at the time of Jesus' birth) instead of the tax census of Quirinius that incited the people to revolt in 6 A.D.²⁰ The reader does not have to accept any of these explanations of controverted events in the Infancy Narratives. They are given only to show the plausibility of their historicity, which makes the denial of it arbitrary and unsubstantiated, as Wright has argued.

One of the more common objections to conception by the Holy Spirit and the virgin birth has been the conjecture that the early Christians "stole" this image from Greek stories (e.g. Alexander the Great), or Roman stories (e.g. Augustus Caesar) to put Jesus on an equal footing with these "divine heroes." Wright contends that this whole proposal is ridiculous, because the Christians viewed the Greeks and Romans as pagans who were not to be imitated, but shunned. The last thing the Christians wanted to do was associate Jesus the Messiah and Son of God with pagan heroes who were not truly God, and exemplified "virtues" that the Christians considered to be abhorrent. After showing that there were no Jewish parallels for a messiah to be born of a virgin,²¹ Wright concludes:

The only conceivable parallels are pagan ones, and these fiercely Jewish stories have certainly not been modelled on them. Luke at least must have known that telling this story ran the risk of making Jesus out to be a pagan demigod. Why, for the sake of an exalted metaphor, would they take this risk - unless they at least believed the stories to be literally true?²²

Wright asks the question why would the early Christians have invented a completely new metaphor (from a Jewish perspective) that risked identifying Jesus with a pagan demigod when all this could do is simply "put embroidering" around the truth of Jesus' divinity which had already been very well established by His resurrection in glory, gift of the Holy Spirit, miracles by His own authority, and self-declaration? Why risk the exceedingly negative downside simply to put icing on the icing? It therefore seems to be highly implausible.

For Wright, there can be no doubt that Matthew and Luke believed Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit and the virgin birth to be literally true. They risked significant negative implications of this doctrine, which were completely unnecessary to establish Jesus' divinity (which was already well-established). These events are among the few that are common to both

¹⁹ See Andrew. E. Steinmann, "When Did Herod the Great Reign?" *Novum Testamentum* 51 (2009): 1–29.

²⁰ See Jack Finegan "Once More: Quirinius's Census" in *The Detroit Baptist Theological Journal*, Fall 2009, 5. 45–54. Finegan holds that "*prote*" in Luke 2:2, does not mean "when" or "while" Quirinius was Governor of Syria, but rather, "*before* Quirinius was Governor of Syria." He shows that Luke was well aware of Quirinius' tax census of 6 A.D. because he speaks about it in Acts 5. Therefore, he must be speaking of a *different* census in Luke 2:2, and the word "*prote*" must refer to "before."

²¹ Note that the prophet Isaiah in Is. 7:14 – "the virgin shall conceive and bear a child" -- was not referring to the Messiah; Matthew is the first Jewish author to interpret it this way. See N.T. Wright "Suspending scepticism".

²² Ibid.

Infancy Narratives, and form the core of Luke's story (from Mary's perspective) and Matthew's story (from Joseph's perspective). Therefore, it seems likely that Matthew and Luke were aware of a tradition that they considered very credible. If they did not have such certainty, then it would be exceedingly difficult to explain why they used a pagan metaphor (without any precedent in Judaism) with its negative implications to describe in otherwise completely Jewish terms the conception and birth of their Messiah. So what grounded their certainty? Perhaps it is not far-fetched to believe that it was Mary herself – who was part of the apostolic community in the upper room at Pentecost (Acts 1:14) – or some other credible source related to her. This is the only plausible explanation for how these very strange, pagan events were introduced into the gospel narratives by two authors who were conscientious and restrained.

Some critics may in the end respond that they find the idea of a conception by the Holy Spirit and a virgin birth to be distasteful because it might seem too fanciful or a judgment against sexuality. I have already responded to this in the previous chapter, and so I conclude with Wright's general response to all such arguments:

If that's what God deemed appropriate, who am I to object?²³

Chapter Seven

Heaven

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The popular view of Heaven is frequently boring – e.g. people sitting atop clouds playing harps. We have the feeling that Heaven will be devoid of emotion and excitement, yet, Jesus had no such view of Heaven – indeed He thought it was precisely the opposite.

We have already seen one indication of the kingdom manifest in Jesus' own resurrection – the spiritual transformation and glorification of our bodies in the same way as Jesus' (see Volume 3 – Chapter Five). Recall that Paul calls this new reality a *pneumatikon soma* (a spiritual body) which will be incorruptible and glorious – not subject to any imperfection, sickness, suffering, or physical law (see Volume 3, Chapter Five). It will be our embodied nature brought to perfection through Jesus' own glorification. As marvelous as this promise is, it is just the tip of the iceberg. Jesus goes far beyond this in his preaching of the kingdom of Heaven--specifically in his allusion to the Messianic banquet. Jesus' preaching of the kingdom had two interrelated dimensions – the present kingdom (brought to the world by Jesus) and the future kingdom (which will be the eternal fulfillment of every person through the unconditional love and joy of the triune God).

So how does Jesus describe this future kingdom of eternal love and joy? His central organizing image is the *Messianic banquet*. St. John and St. Paul extend this image by implying that it is a kingdom of unconditional love. We will first examine Jesus' image (Section I), then

²³ Ibid.

that of John and Paul (Section II), and then put the two together in a contemporary reflection on heaven (Section III).

I. The Messianic Banquet [Back to top](#)

Jesus uses the image of the messianic banquet to describe the fundamental dynamic of the heavenly kingdom – intimate friendship/love (*philia*) characterized by table fellowship brought to perfection. He indicates that it will be a universal reality (including people from north, south, east, and west – Gentiles and Jews), and a transtemporal reality (including the early patriarchs):

I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (Mt 8:10-11).²⁴

The messianic banquet was a familiar concept in First Century Judaism,²⁵ taking its most explicit form in the prophet Isaiah:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined. And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, “Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us (Is 25: 6–9).

The mountain top here implies an eschatological or heavenly event. The banquet is filled with foods that were considered delicious and beautiful – inciting joy. The banquet will have people from every nation, and the gentiles will be brought to a similar status with the Jewish people (“And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations”). There will be no sadness at this heavenly banquet, and all suffering will be redeemed (“the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces”). He will also put an end to death for all eternity (“He will swallow up death *forever*”).

The banquet image conveys several important points. First, inasmuch as banquets are for family and close friends, it implies that all in the kingdom will be elevated to this familial status. The banquet is also a time to enjoy the abundance, joy, and beauty of creation. It relieves us of

²⁴ The Lucan parallel “...when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God” (Lk 13: 28-29).

²⁵ See Brant Pitre 2009 “Jesus, The Messianic Banquet, and the Kingdom of God” in *Letter & Spirit* (5) pp. 145-166.

the concerns and sadness of the day and brings people together in a spirit of joy, and so we are able to enjoy friendship with people at their “joyful best.” Thus, it can lead us to a deeper insight into and appreciation of others. In short, the banquet is not only a time of joy, but also a time of deep *familial* love which can be so profound that we lose track of the passage of time.

Did Jesus really intend all of these themes by using this image? No doubt he did, because this is what the image conveyed to popular sentiment during his day. But Jesus intended much more than the conviviality, friendship, and familial love of the banquet. He wanted to show that this image applied to the eternal, universal, and transcendent kingdom of God. Meier notes in this regard:

With the affirmation that the Gentiles will join the long-dead patriarchs of Israel at the banquet, Jesus indicates that this fully realized Kingdom of God is not only future but also in some way discontinuous with this present world. ... In particular, the depiction of the three great patriarchs as alive and participating in a heavenly banquet implies both the transcendence of death and the regathering of the people of Israel not only from all places but also from all times.²⁶

Pitre and Wright see Jesus’ Last Supper as a prefigurement of the eternal messianic banquet, in which love will be victorious over death, darkness, evil, and discord. Prophetic action reaches out to the future to bring its fulfillment into the present. For Jesus, the Last Supper is a prophetic action which reaches out not only to his passion and death on Cavalry, but also to the eternal messianic banquet which will bring his prophetic action to fulfillment.²⁷

In sum, Jesus sees the heavenly kingdom to be an eternal state in which we will see and enjoy one another at our good, lovable, and convivial best. This atmosphere of beauty, goodness, love, and joy is like a gigantic network of interpersonal relationships among people from every nation and time, brought together through the love and lavishness of his Father. For Jesus, the kingdom of Heaven is the kingdom of love – the love of family, friends, and banquet fellowship, catalyzed by the love of the risen Messiah and the communion of those who have placed their trust in him (the communion of saints).

²⁶ John P. Meier 1994 *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Vol. 2, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*. (New York: Doubleday). p. 317.

²⁷ See N.T. Wright 1996 *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Vol 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press) p. 558.

II. The Kingdom of Love in John and Paul

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The kingdom of God is a reflection of the reality and fullness of God – what he is and who he is – and this fullness of reality is perfect love. We have already seen this revelation in the preaching of Jesus – his address of Yahweh (all powerful one), as Abba (the affectionate, caring, and compassionate parent), the identification of his Father with the father of the Prodigal Son, and the elevation of love to the highest commandment (see Volume IV, Chapter 3), as well as the definition of love (*agapē*) through the Beatitudes (See Volume IV, Chapter 2). We have also seen it in the person and actions of Jesus – his care and compassion for sinners, the sick, and the poor (see Volume IV, Chapter Four), his genuine affection for his friends and disciples, and most importantly, in his self-sacrificial love manifest in his body and blood poured out on the cross (see Volume IV, Chapter Five).

We have seen the source of Jesus' unconditional love – in his perfect communion with the Father and sharing in the Father's life and power ("all things have been given over to me by my Father... No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son...").

As John and Paul reflected upon the mystery of Jesus' and the Father's perfect love, they could not help but conclude that "God is love" and that the fullness of God is the fullness of love with all of its positive, life-giving, powerful, beautiful, and joy filled qualities. John says in his first letter:

Dear fiends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 Jn 4:7-10).

Paul speaks of the immensity and incomprehensibility of God's love in his Letter to the Ephesians:

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (Eph 3: 17-19).

Paul's prayer for the Ephesians is not only a prayer for the present, but also a prayer for the future. It is a prayer for their salvation in the kingdom of Heaven – the only place where they will be able to behold how "wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ," which is "the fullness of God."

If the kingdom of Heaven is a reflection of the fullness of God, then it must be, according to Jesus, John, and Paul, the *kingdom of perfect love*. If we are not to leave this idea of “perfect love” at the level of abstraction, we will have to apply Paul’s and Jesus’ definitions of love to it. So what would the kingdom of heaven be according to Paul’s definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13? It would be a state of perfect patience and kindness and rejoicing in the truth. It would be the complete absence of envy, boasting, pride, contempt, ego-centricity, anger, resentments, and evil. It would be a perfect state of protection, trust, hope, and constant affirmation.

Jesus’ definition of love is contained within the Beatitudes (see Volume IV – Chapter Two). Accordingly, the kingdom of heaven would be a state of perfect humble-heartedness (“poor in spirit”), gentle-heartedness (“the meek”), forgiveness, caring, and compassion (“the merciful”), purity of heart, and peace. Yet even with these specifications, the kingdom of love still seems abstract. Is there any way we can combine the concreteness of Jesus’ image of the messianic banquet with the definitions of love given by Paul and Jesus? The following reflection may help to do this.

III.

A Reflection on the Kingdom of Heaven

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We might begin our reflection with Jesus’ definition of love (*agapē*) in the Beatitudes and the two great parables of love, The Prodigal Son and The Good Samaritan. For Jesus, love at its core is genuine care and compassion for others (which requires humility and gentleness). If in heaven, God brings our love to perfection, then He will help us to become our truly good and authentic selves so that we can see the unique goodness and lovability of others as they see our unique goodness and lovability. This lays the groundwork for an act of empathy that so closely bonds us with others that we naturally give our whole selves to them. Let us examine this idea more deeply.

When our goodness or virtue is brought to perfection, our alienation from self and others is removed. We see people in their true and most beautiful state with their unique inner light and integrity. This vision of ourselves and others brings an overwhelming sense of joy. We know this to be true by assessing our own experience of joy when we encounter truly *good* people.

Jesus’ followers (and even total strangers) saw his goodness, and found him quite irresistible. They not only enjoyed being around him, they wanted to remain with him. We may have noticed this in some particularly good friends or acquaintances – who have deep faith, humility, gentleness, and compassion. Their transparent goodness evokes trust, and that trust becomes the foundation for a relationship that opens upon ever-deepening friendship, love, and joy.

We not only experience this in our encounters with truly good people, we may also have noticed it in ourselves. When we become more humble, gentle, virtuous, forgiving, compassionate, and empathetic, people enjoy us more. They feel enhanced and ennobled by being in our company. They trust us more, and they enter into a deeper relationship with us. When our unique goodness is purified, we become more lovable and we are able to more deeply

see the unique goodness and lovability of others. If we assume that all of us have a virtually inexhaustible depth of unique goodness and lovability, then each person in the kingdom of heaven presents every other person in the kingdom of heaven with a reality of unique goodness, lovability, beauty, trustworthiness, and joy—a virtually inexhaustible supply.

Now imagine for a moment that you are that person – that you could bring people out of their darkness with your unique ennobling and virtuous spirit. Now imagine further that every single human being in heaven was brought to this state of perfection through God’s grace – perfect humility, virtue, authenticity, courage and generosity – but each one has it in his or her own unique way – so that no manifestation of these qualities is the same. Now imagine further that you could get a sense of the *collective* goodness of all these unique manifestations of perfect goodness. They would be like notes constituting a perfect melody and harmony, like a symphony. What could we do except behold and enjoy all of these perfect notes within the symphony of unique goodness orchestrated by God? It would be unbelievably joyful.

When the darkness of egocentricity and narcissism is removed, one sees the radiant splendor of other people which is far more beautiful than lights or sounds, spectra or symphonies, because each person has a virtually inexhaustible depth. Now imagine being in Heaven and seeing yourself and others in one huge collective vision just like this – all orchestrated by God who is truly infinite goodness. You would never be bored because you would be probing a depth of spiritual beauty giving rise to ever increasing joy.

By now it will be evident that goodness and love are interrelated. So when our goodness is brought to perfection, so also is our love. Recall that love begins with recognizing the “good news” in the other – not only the goodness of the other but the lovability of the other. When we see the good news of the other in all of its splendor and perfection, perfect empathy – connectedness of feeling and thinking – ensues. Recall that empathy not only *connects* us with others, it also breaks down the enmity between us making it just as easy, if not easier, to *do* the good for others as doing the good for ourselves.

When goodness is brought to perfection in every unique person, it makes all of them perfectly lovable – there is not a single defect in their lovability. We want to behold them in their perfection, but we want to go beyond this – we want to enter into a relationship with them, to do the good for them, and to give ourselves to them. This is what it means to have our love brought to perfection. We are not completed by simply enjoying others; we are completed when we give ourselves over to the beloved. This idea of giving ourselves, being accepted by the other, and having the other give back to us, is the perfection of interpersonal personhood – a reflection of what is taking place in the Holy Trinity itself.

This perfection of *interpersonal* personhood is also the perfection of joy. In the Gospel of John, Jesus brings together the themes of the love of God, the love of one another, and perfection of joy:

As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s

commandments and remain in his love. 'I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete' (John 15:9-11).

All of these images of love, joy, and fulfillment are synthesized in Jesus' image of the banquet. Think about a time when you were gathered around a dining room table in a restaurant with a group of intimate friends. As the evening went on, the topics of conversation seemed to fade into the background while the people who were speaking came more to the foreground. Everybody seemed to have a sense of others' goodness, lovability, loyalty, friendship, and willingness to serve. These characteristics arose out of stories, humor, affection, and depth of personality. At certain points the sense of community becomes almost palpable. Finally, someone looks at his watch and says, "Wow, its two o'clock in the morning! Where did the time go?" Time seems to disappear when we lose ourselves in the goodness, lovability, and beauty of others-- as we give ourselves to them in a perfect act of empathy.

Now imagine what it would be like to be in Heaven where everybody's goodness and lovability are brought to perfection. As we gaze upon each of these transcendent mysteries, we find ourselves perfectly connected to them and giving ourselves over to them. They experience the very same thing when they gaze upon *us* in our unique, transcendent goodness, lovability and beauty. You would not have to stop at some surface dimension of their lovability because there would be no egocentricity or narcissism in you or in them to block the full scope of their unique lovability. This love is so profound that you find a home in the other, complete the other, and are completed by the other through mutual gift of self. You are as lost in the depth of the mystery of their unique lovability as they are in your unique lovability.

Now imagine further that you have the capacity to enter into this kind of relationship with billions upon billions of people, and that you can have complete empathy with them as they can for you. We are now beginning to touch on the love intrinsic to the kingdom of heaven. Yet we have barely scratched the surface, because at the center of it all -- orchestrating it all -- is the *infinite* love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Inasmuch as the three divine persons are unrestricted and unconditional love for each other, they are unrestrictedly and unconditionally empathetic, self-giving, and joyful. Inasmuch as they desire to share themselves totally with us, they call us into a relationship with them, a relationship of *unrestricted and unconditional* goodness, lovability, self-gift, and joy. They offer an unrestricted outpouring of themselves as well as an unrestricted acceptance of everyone in the kingdom of heaven. They unify all of the unique lovable inner worlds of everyone in that kingdom. Now imagine that you get to participate in this -- without egocentricity or narcissism -- giving yourself to that incredible array of beloveds through the unrestricted and unconditional love of the Trinity. You would be completely fulfilled, completely accepted, completely needed, completely contributive, completely at home, completely immersed in billions of people brought to loving perfection by the ineffable mystery of infinite love.

The sixteenth century Carmelite mystic, St. Teresa of Avila gives a faint glimmer of the ecstasy of this infinite love in describing some of her experiences of the love of God in prayer:

The *loving* exchange that takes place between the soul and God is so sweet that I beg Him in His goodness to give a taste of this love to anyone who thinks I am lying. On the days this lasted I went about as though stupefied. I desired neither to see nor to speak.... It seems the Lord carries the soul away and places it in *ecstasy*; thus there is no room for pain or suffering, because *joy* soon enters in.²⁸

If this is only a finite taste of the infinite love that is to come, the reality of our spiritual destiny will be nothing less than perfect ecstasy through the billions upon billions of loving relationships drawn together in perfect communion with the infinitely loving God.

Is Heaven even more? Does it go beyond the ecstasy of perfect goodness and love? It does inasmuch as it includes the fulfillment of the other two transcendental desires (truth and beauty). Recall the four transcendental desires addressed in Volume II – Chapter Two – truth, love, goodness, and beauty. The fulfillment of two of these desires (for perfect love and goodness) is directly addressed by Jesus, but the other two (for truth and beauty) are seen only in the light of love and goodness.

Jesus does not restrict truth to the “mind’s reasons”—seeking the complete intelligibility of reality through physics, mathematics, logic, metaphysics, and the other major disciplines. Rather, he begins with the truth of the heart, and the highest truth of the heart is his relationship with the Father. Thus when he says “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son...”, he is pointing to the highest truth -- the lived awareness of the Father’s love and goodness which reveals his life, power, and creative activity. Thus, Jesus sees the created world through the eyes of his Father – who *lovingly* made it, and shared his creative activity with His Son.

In what does the fulfillment of our desire for perfect truth consist? It would partially consist in a beholding of the intelligibility of the created world (from the fundamental equations of physics to the mathematics that underlies them, from the transcendental powers and nature of human beings to the moral religious laws that govern them, etc.). As fascinating and beautiful as all this is, it is not the fulfillment of our desire for perfect truth (the beatific vision²⁹). The vision of truth itself must include an insight into the unrestricted act of thinking that created the world of complete intelligibility – and not only an insight into its thinking, but most importantly, for Jesus, into its love and goodness. Thus, the fulfillment of our desire for perfect truth must be a beholding of the unconditionally loving, unrestricted mind and heart of God lovingly creating the world of complete intelligibility for transcendent creatures like ourselves. As the name “beatific” suggests, this vision brings with it not only the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity, but the satisfaction of being immersed in tremendous beauty – the beauty of complete intelligibility, perfect symmetry, perfect creativity, perfect mind, and the perfect love behind it all. In the beatific vision -- truth is beauty – and beauty is truth – love and goodness are truth and beauty –

²⁸ Teresa of Avila 1976, p. 194.

²⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas defines the beatific vision as the consummate happiness that comes from the perfect satisfaction of all our desires (the desire for perfect truth, perfect love, perfect goodness, and perfect beauty). Nothing can satisfy these desires for perfection except an absolutely perfect being which is itself perfect truth, love, goodness, and beauty – namely, God. See Aquinas 1947 *Summa Theologica* I-II, q.,3,a.8. and I-II, q. 2,a.8.

and truth and beauty are love and goodness. To behold it all in the midst of real interpersonal love is yet another dimension of joy that surpasses all understanding.

This brings us to the idea of perfect home. Jesus uses expressions such as “family, rooms, and houses” that convey a sense of ultimate home (see Jn. 14:2-3). When we are immersed in the perfect love of the Trinity and all others in the kingdom of heaven, there can be no alienation from self or others – no emptiness, no darkness, no negation, no loneliness, no pain that arises out of egocentricity, narcissism, or evil. We are in complete harmony with self and others, at peace with self and others, and this perfect harmony and peace may be described as perfect home. This is our true calling – what the unconditionally loving God has prepared for us – what we were created for.

As can be seen, Jesus’ view of Heaven is anything but boring; it does not lack emotion and excitement, it exudes it at the highest levels of joy and ecstasy; it is not lackluster, but the complete satisfaction of our curiosity, the overwhelming satisfaction of our desire for beauty, and the continuous satisfaction of our desire for love and goodness.

IV. Correlation with Near Death Experiences [Back to top](#)

As noted in Volume II – Chapter One, contemporary studies of near death experiences reveal some interesting parallels with the Christian view of resurrection – specifically, that God is immensely loving, and that heaven is centered on this immensity of love. Near death experiences cannot validate the unconditional nature or eternal status of this “immensity of love,” because they cannot penetrate the knowledge and will of God. However, they can show that the experience of a large number of clinically dead individuals has intense love at its center. This finding is most powerfully described in patient’s experience of a loving white light. Raymond Moody expresses it as follows:

What is perhaps the most incredible common element in the accounts I have studied, and is certainly the element which has the most profound effect upon the individual, is the encounter with a very bright light. Typically, at its first appearance this light is dim, but it rapidly gets brighter until it reaches an unearthly brilliance. Yet, even though this light (usually said to be white or "clear") is of an indescribable brilliance, many make the specific point that it does not in any way hurt their eyes, or dazzle them, or keep them from seeing other things around them....Despite the light's unusual manifestation, however, not one person has expressed any doubt whatsoever that it was a being, a being of light. Not only that, it is a *personal* being. It has a very definite personality. The *love* and the warmth which emanate from this being to the dying person are utterly beyond words, and he feels completely surrounded by it and taken up in it, completely at ease and *accepted* in the presence of this being. He senses an irresistible magnetic attraction to this light. He is ineluctably drawn to it.³⁰

³⁰ Raymond Moody, 1975, *Life After Life* (New York: Harper Collins) p. 49. Italics mine.

This being of light is invariably described as loving and accepting. Some people associate it with God, Jesus, or an angel. Given the large numbers of patients in different studies who have witnessed this loving white light,³¹ we might infer that it is a beginning point of what Jesus described as the Messianic banquet and what Paul described as the wide and long and high and deep love of Christ which is the fullness of God (Eph 3:17-19).

We now encounter a seeming contradiction of Jesus' presentation of His unconditionally loving Father and the eternal banquet of unconditional love— the possibility and/or reality of hell. How could such a God – who loves us so much – allow anyone to go to a domain of darkness – away from the light?

Chapter Eight

Hell

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Jesus preached the reality of a domain “prepared for the devil and all his angels” (Mt. 25:41). He describes it as a place of pain, darkness, exclusion, and emptiness. He gives several warnings about the dangers of pursuing a life of self-absorption and self-idolatry giving rise to a lack of forgiveness and compassion.

Two words are used for this domain. The more frequent word is “Gehenna,” but occasionally “Hades” (which is a Greek translation of the Hebrew “Sheol” – the abode of the dead) is used. Gehenna is a fiery pit outside of Jerusalem which was associated with barrenness and ongoing torment. Luke uses the term “Hades” to have a similar meaning in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31). These uses are not the invention of Jesus, but rather that of the Old Testament and extratestamental literature.³²

How can Jesus' view of hell be squared with his view of the unconditional love of God and the intrinsic goodness of every human being? When we define love as Jesus did – humble-heartedness, gentle-heartedness, compassion, patience, kindness, not growing angry, etc., Jesus' view of hell seems to contradict love – and therefore the nature of God.

One of the most concise definitions of hell that gives an important insight into how hell can be reconciled with the unconditional love of God comes from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “a state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed.”³³ This definition comes from centuries of reflection on three New Testament teachings which influence the doctrine of hell.

1. Jesus' teaching on the pains of hell implied by His use of “Gehenna” and His expression “outside in the darkness where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.”

³¹ See the sixteen different studies mentioned in Volume 2 – Chapter One.

³² See McKenzie 1965, *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.) pp. 299-300.

³³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1997, par. 1033.

2. The association of hell with a lack of compassion and love for others (e.g. the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man – Lk 16:19-31, and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats – Mt 25:31-46).
3. Jesus' revelation of the unconditional love of God (seen in the Parable of the Prodigal Son – Lk 15:11-32, and the Parable of the Lost Sheep – Lk 15:1-7). When these three New Testament teachings are put together systematically, they point to the above definition of hell given in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. This definition is quite dense and requires considerable explanation.

Let us begin with the most basic part of the definition – “self-exclusion from communion.” “Communion” is derived from the early Christian use of “Koinōnia” which refers to “the idealized state of love, unity, and community that exists within the Kingdom of God, and toward which the Body of Christ – the Christian church -- aspires.” So at a very basic level, hell is the absence of love, unity, and community with God and the blessed. Though hell is sometimes portrayed as flames, darkness, and “wailing and grinding of teeth,” these images are *metaphors* for the *pain* of a domain without love.³⁴ The absence of love is emptiness, darkness, coldness, and loneliness; it is also envy, contempt, anger, resentment, egocentricity, narcissism, self-idolatry, and hatred. All of these dimensions of “unlove” or “anti-love” are painful, and so hell is associated with this pain.

The next part of the definition concerns the reason why the unconditionally loving God would allow a state of hell – namely, the free choice of individuals to reject love, God, and others. The definition says that hell is “*self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed.*” This means that the all-loving God does not *send* people to hell, but rather *allows* people to *choose* hell through an act of definitive, self-determining freedom.

Why would anyone choose hell and the pain associated with it? In brief, some people may prefer to endure the above mentioned pain to live in unbounded self-absorption, egocentricity, dominion over others, and to become a “god” for self and others. For these people, love, God, and others are all negatives, while self, power, autonomy, and dominion are supreme. They definitively choose as their meaning in life “god-like” status, the rejection of truly divine sovereignty, and the subjugation of others to themselves. This *requires* that they reject the love of God and others because they cannot simultaneously make both self and love their highest priority. For them, love gets in the way of self-absorption and self-idolatry, and so God and love must be rejected.

The purpose of our life in this world is to define ourselves. We must choose between two fundamental options: (1) God, others, and love, or (2) self-absorption and self-idolatry. We accomplish this process of self-definition through our decisions and actions during the course of

³⁴ The Synoptic Gospels (particularly Matthew), the Letter of James and the Book of Revelation make reference to the imagery of “flames, a fiery pit, and prison.” These authors refer to popular Jewish Apocalyptic which was prevalent in the intertestamental period (see McKenzie 1965, p. 300). Paul, John, Peter, Hebrews, and other New Testament writers prefer other descriptions of this negative condition. Paul views it as “death” and “separation from the Kingdom of God.” John also speaks of this negative condition as “death,” as well as “judgment,” “darkness,” and “exclusion from the eternal life communicated by the Son” (see Ibid). Evidently, Paul’s and John’s non-apocalyptic understanding of this negative condition are much closer to the definition given in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

our lives. Eventually those decisions and actions form habits – a second nature – and they become stronger and stronger – gradually forming our essence – our self-definition.

We don't have to define ourselves perfectly before leaving this world. It is doubtful that any human being could do this. Nevertheless, we do need to make a committed decision toward one set of goals or the other (because we cannot hold both sets of goals at the same time, for they are contradictory). Thus, our lives are characterized by choosing to move in the direction of either self or others, autonomy or love, and worship of self or worship of God. Even if our intention is to choose love, others, and God, we could choose courses of action which run contrary to this intention. Nevertheless, we are not locked into these bad choices, for the Lord of unconditional love allows us to repent and return to him – even an endless number of times.³⁵ When we do repent, the Lord not only forgives us, but gives us grace to reorient our lives toward love. Eventually a “mindset” begins to form – a leaning toward love rather than autonomy, towards others rather than self, and toward divine worship rather than self-worship. In this way, our complex network of decisions, actions, acts of repentance, struggles to stay on the right road, and the little improvements we make define us as beings of love, worship, and community.

Alternatively, we might make decisions that lead us into darkness -- in favor of self, autonomy, and self-idolatry – decisions which show no regard for others, and which choose dominion, and narcissistic satisfaction above empathy and compassion for others. We don't care if we plunge others into suffering, darkness, emptiness, or hopelessness, so long as we get what we want. We can even experience the *opposite* of an act of repentance and become hardened in our resolve to intensify others' misery. For example, we might have a “weak” moment in our journey toward complete self-obsession and self-idolatry, and show some empathy or compassion for another person, and then have second thoughts – and even regrets. We might think to ourselves – “I could have taken far more advantage of him – I won't be compassionate again.” As we make these decisions, another kind of “mindset” develops, and we gradually define ourselves in terms of “unlove” and “anti-love.” Eventually we get to the point of *preferring* “unlove” and “anti-love,” which could lead to a *choice* of an eternity of self-absorption, autonomy, dominion, self-obsession, and self-idolatry above an eternity of love, others, and God.³⁶

³⁵ Jesus' response to Peter that he should forgive his neighbor “70 times 7 times” (Mt 18:22) reflects God's own heart and attitude, for He would not ask us to do what he himself would not do. “70 x 7 times” refers to the perfect prime number (7) times 10 times the perfect prime number (7) which for a Semite means “an endless number of times.” This is commensurate with Jesus' proclamation that the Father will take us back fully into his family—even if we have sinned as gravely as the prodigal son.

³⁶ Readers interested in how people might be able to make a definitive free choice to remain in an atmosphere of egocentricity, dominion of others, and self-idolatry – instead of choosing the Kingdom of love, beauty, and truth, will want to read the modern parable by C.S. Lewis -- *The Great Divorce*. He tells a story about a bus ride from hell to heaven. The bus parks on the outskirts of heaven, at which point, “the wispy ghosts” from the grey city of hell are greeted by bright spirits - deceased relatives, friends, and emissaries of the loving God - who come to persuade and help them make the *choice* of heaven. Most of the ghosts *choose* to return to hell because the love (*agapē*) of the kingdom of heaven is either unintelligible or “simply too much to endure.” One ghost cannot believe that there are so many golden apples – freely available to *anyone* -- in the kingdom of heaven. He reasons that they could not have any “value” in this overly generous environment, and so spends the rest of his time at the outskirts of heaven trying to stuff his pockets with golden apples (which are heavy for him) so that he can take them to hell where they will be highly unusual and have a “much greater value.” Another self-conscious ghost keeps hiding in the bushes while her friend pleads with her to stop worrying about her appearance so that she can take in the splendor of heaven, but she

Hell is oftentimes viewed as a punishment for past sin, and there are implications of this in both the New Testament scriptures and in theological reflection throughout the centuries.³⁷ The idea of punishment is not accentuated in the definition from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter *CCC*) which emphasizes the *self*-exclusion of people from communion with God and the blessed. How can the views of “punishment” from the Synoptic Gospels and the Church tradition be reconciled with the notion of “*self*-exclusion from communion” given in the *CCC*)?

As noted above, the Catholic Church had to reconcile several different New Testament passages to synthesize its doctrine on hell. In addition to the passages on punishment from the Synoptic Gospels, there are also passages on the unconditional love of God (Lk 15: 1-7 and Lk 15: 11-32) and passages on people without compassion or empathy moving on the path toward hell (Lk 16: 19-31 and Mt 25: 31-46). The Church reconciles the tension in these passages by taking the emphasis off of punishment as “*God’s* action” and places it on “the actions of a person who freely rejects love and communion with God and others” (a form of *self-punishment*).

Self-punishment can come from a “tradeoff” in which one accepts a negative consequence in order to procure something intensely desired – such as Faust selling his soul to the devil for worldly fame and power. Sometimes self-punishment can come from self-hatred which can come from hatred and contempt for others. It seems that we eventually apply the criterion we use for others to ourselves. Thus, self-punishment is not as unusual as it might first seem. There may actually be people like Faust who would choose hell for a diabolical reward, or people who choose hell out of a sense of self-hatred emanating from their hatred of others.

The definition of “hell” in the *CCC* emphasizes *self*-punishment (self-exclusion) instead of “punishment by God.” This position is consistent with other teachings of Jesus –such as God’s unconditional love and the definitive power of human freedom to reject God, love, and others. This emphasis assures that God is not viewed as either a “justice machine” (meting out justice in a heartless, mechanical fashion) or “an angry God who needs to get even with sinners with whom he has run out of patience.” Both of these notions of “God” are irreconcilable with Jesus’ teaching about the Father of the Prodigal Son, Abba, the beatitudes, and love as the highest commandment.

The unconditionally loving God (the Father of Jesus) has no interest in punishing anyone – either out of vengeance or a sense of strict justice. He gives people what they really want for

can’t seem to break away from her self-absorption. Lewis ingeniously gives many other portrayals of ghosts with other preferences – a ghost who prefers to hang onto her resentment of God in hell (for taking her child on earth) rather than see her child in heaven with the loving God; a bishop who prefers “to continue his search for God in hell” rather than actually finding God in heaven; and many others. See Lewis 2009.

³⁷ Gehenna is generally associated with the punishment of evildoers particularly in the Gospel of Matthew. Gehenna can also refer to a place of eternal punishment (Mt 18:8) or to a place of definitive destruction (Mt 10:28) implying that it is a place of annihilation rather than eternal punishment. This resembles the rabbinical use of it in extratestamental Judaism. Jesus apparently uses the term with both of these rabbinical meanings which would have been familiar to his audience. See McKenzie, 1965, pp. 299-300. Additionally, many Church theologians have considered hell to be a place of punishment. See Ludwig Ott 1955, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, (Tan Publishers) p. 479.

their eternal “happiness.” If their decisions and actions consistently manifest (without repentance) a desire for autonomy, self-absorption, narcissism, and contempt for and abuse of others as well as a continual rejection (without repentance) of God, the blessed, and love, they come very close to a *definitive*³⁸ preference or choice to be “excused” from heaven and to go to a place where unlove and anti-love reign supreme – where they can have what they truly want.

They will join other people who have the very same preference which has the consequence of creating an atmosphere of abuse, contempt, hatred, emptiness, and darkness – with its attendant deep psychological pain. It seems that some people might think that this pain is “worth it” in order to procure the “benefits” of hell – more enmity, narcissism, contempt, abuse, and hatred. It is as if convinced sadists will embrace masochism in order to obtain greater levels of sadistic pleasure.

Is human freedom capable of this? Jesus suggests that it is. However, this attitude of “anti-love” cannot exist in the kingdom of heaven. It completely contradicts the love of the kingdom, and therefore, it requires a completely separate place in which people with that attitude can continue to stoke and endure the flames of psychological pain in order to obtain sadistic pleasure and self-idolatry.

Thus, God does not create the pain of hell. Rather, he allows people to enter a state in which they can create pain for others and self, and so obtain their true preference and lifelong desire. When people choose this domain, God is incredibly saddened – not only because they have rejected him and the love he has provided, but also because they choose agony above the joy of communion with others. An all-loving God could not hate these people – he would continue to love them just as the father in the parable continues to love his prodigal son. Nevertheless, because of their definitive choice to reject love, he allows them, with great sadness, to have their heart’s desire.

Is hell eternal? The Synoptic Gospels indicate that Jesus said that it is. The CCC definition indicates *why* hell is eternal – because those who choose hell, *definitively* choose to reject love, God and others. Thus, the eternity of hell *follows* from the *definitive* decision of those who choose hell, not vice versa. If a person definitively chooses hell, and God recognizes the definitiveness of that decision, he grants them their eternal desire. However, the opposite is not the case -- God does not create an eternally painful domain in which to cast evil people. Hence, the eternity of hell comes from *people’s* definitive choice to reject love, but not from God’s decision.

The above interpretation is borne out by the CCC’s choice to define hell as “a *state* of definitive self-exclusion” instead of “a *place* of definitive self-exclusion.” There has been considerable theological debate about this topic and it is noteworthy that the CCC has decided in favor of the theological view expressed by many modern theologians such as Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar.³⁹ As von Balthasar notes, a state implies that “hell is not an object that

³⁸ The CCC’s use of “definitive” in its definition of hell will be taken up in detail below in this section.

³⁹ St. Augustine and St. Gregory held that hell was a *place* under the earth. Other theologians held that hell is a place whose location is unspecified. Still other theologians, such as Karl Rahner, Bernard A. Marthaler, and Hans Urs von

is 'full' or 'empty' of human individuals, but a possibility that is not 'created' by God but ... by the free individuals who choose it.”⁴⁰ If the Church had decided instead to define hell as a *place*, it could have implied that He created an eternal domain for the condemned – which may have been in greater tension with His unconditional love.

Could a person change his mind after experiencing the pain of hell, and plead to God to rescue him? The question is really a moot point because when the all-loving God allows a person to choose *definitively* a state of self-exclusion from him and the blessed, he does so with complete certitude that the person’s decision *is* definitive (eternal). This belief is grounded in God’s omniscience, which enables him to know every nuance and potential of every human being. Therefore God would be certain that a person *would not* change his mind, but rather would *perpetually* prefer the “rejection of love” to communion with him and the blessed. He would be certain that a person’s choice was to eternally endure the pain of separation from Him and love to procure the “privileges” of hell – the supremacy of self and unmitigated contempt for others.

What if a person does not *definitively* choose self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed? Or, asked the other way around, “What if a person only *imperfectly* chooses communion with God and the blessed?” This condition indicates that the person in question is in some respect open to communion with God and the blessed, but in other respects, is impeded from desiring it completely (and entering into this communion perfectly in the kingdom of heaven). The Catholic Church provides for this condition of imperfect freedom to love (obscured by egotistical desires) in its doctrine on *Purgatory* which holds that there is a state of purification of desire, choice, and action after death. In this state, God allows individuals through His grace to purge remnant desires for egocentricity, dominion, and self-idolatry. These individuals will not remain in purgatory forever (nor will they regress to hell), but eventually will be ushered into heaven when their purification is complete.

In conclusion, the unconditionally loving God does not make a mechanical judgment about our salvation. God’s will is to save *every* person who chooses to be saved (through repentance and faith) and who wants to be brought into a kingdom where “love, others, and God” take precedence over “autonomy and egocentricity.”⁴¹ Though an all-loving God desires to save *everyone*, he allows individuals to refuse his salvific intention, and to choose definitively a state without love.

This interpretation of hell (the state of definitive self-exclusion from God and the blessed) requires that we make distinctions concerning God’s intention -- He *desires* to save everyone, but he *allows* people to reject his salvation, and he *judges* everyone omnisciently – seeing into

Balthasar favor the position that hell is a *state*. The official Catholic Church has moved in the direction of “a state” and has indicated this in both the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as well as the *Catholic Faith Handbook for Youth* (2007).

⁴⁰ See Jack Mulder 2010 *Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition* (Indiana University Press) p. 145 (citing Hans Urs von Balthasar).

⁴¹ God’s desire to save everyone is thoroughly discussed in Volume IV – Chapter Eight.

the depths of our hearts, and perfectly discerning our *definitive* intention to choose self-exclusion or self-inclusion in his kingdom.

We can now summarize this interpretation of the CCC's definition of hell. God wills to save everyone who chooses loving communion with him, who asks sincerely for his forgiveness, and who is willing to be purified in love to enter into that communion. He is able to discern and judge perfectly the intentions of every human being, and so he knows whether a person definitively rejects communion with him and others, and who would therefore be unwilling to be purified in love through the purging of egotistical desires. The all-loving God does not *send people* to hell; he accommodates their definitive choice to reject him, others, and love. He is incredibly saddened by those who make this decision because they choose a negative and destructive form of happiness in favor of true happiness in the Beatific Vision. He does everything possible (through the Holy Spirit and His "conspiracy of Providence") to bring people back to their senses – to the goodness and beauty of love and communion with others, but He will not take away their freedom to definitively choose what they think will make them "happy." He subordinates His will to their will, for this is what is required to create creatures capable of love.

God is caught in the tension between freedom and love. He cannot make truly loving creatures unless he gives them the choice *not* to love (and even the choice to undermine love), because without that choice, we would be restricted to *only* loving behaviors – in which case our love would not be chosen by us, but would be programmed into us by the Creator (who would act as a kind of "divine programmer"). However, the unconditionally loving God did not want to create "robots programmed for loving behaviors." He wanted to make creatures in his own image – capable of love – and in the future, capable of unconditional love with him and others in his heavenly kingdom. Inasmuch as God wanted to make loving creatures, he had to give them freedom *not* to love, and even the freedom to definitively reject love (which entails rejecting him and others who are committed to love). The irony of freedom and love is that the Creator must allow his creatures the freedom to choose "definitive self-exclusion from him and the blessed" in order to give them the capacity to love in His own image. He has to subordinate his will (for universal salvation of all his "beloveds") to our freedom to choose – allowing us the possibility of definitively rejecting the love we have been given. God does not send anyone to hell – hell is the result of the freedom to love brought to the opposite extreme for which it was intended.

Chapter Nine

Purgatory

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The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, “All who die in God’s grace, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven” (CCC 1030).

The origin of the doctrine of purgatory – though formulated in the Early Middle Ages – goes back to the early Christian church’s acceptance of the Jewish idea of atonement after death:

So they all blessed the ways of the Lord, the righteous judge, who reveals the things that are hidden; and they turned to supplication, praying that the sin that had been committed might be wholly blotted out. The noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened as the result of the sin of those who had fallen. He also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin-offering. In doing this he acted very well and honourably, taking account of the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. *Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin* (2 Maccabees 12: 41-46).

Irrespective of whether one believes in the canonicity of the two books of Maccabees (as Catholics do), it is clear that late Judaism (100 B.C. – around the time of 2 Maccabees composition) believed in atonement for sin *after death*. Though there were differing opinions about resurrection from the dead -- some religious parties believing fervently in it and others not – there was a strong faction among those who did believe in a resurrection that atonement could be made for one’s sins *after death*.

This belief made its way into the intertestamental period and the time of Jesus. Indeed, Jesus apparently held to the possibility of atonement after death when he declared,

Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come (Mt. 12:32).

If Jesus did not believe in atonement after death (“in the age to come”), his statement about the enduring nature of the sin against the Holy Spirit would be altogether incoherent. Since it is difficult to believe that he was being incoherent (or meant this declaration in jest), it is highly likely he believed in post mortem atonement for sin.

Saint Paul also seems to believe in atonement after death as indicated by his advocacy of praying for the dead. In II Timothy 1:16-18, he declares:

May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains. On the contrary, when he was in Rome, he searched hard for me until he found me. *May the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day* [the Day of Judgment]! You know very well in how many ways he helped me in Ephesus.

The context indicates that Onesiphorus is deceased,⁴² yet Paul prays that the Lord will have mercy on him on “that day,” which refers to the Day of Judgment. Evidently Paul believed that the Day of Judgment was in the future (after Onesiphorus’ death), indicating his belief in the efficacy of prayer for those who were deceased (prior to their judgment). Therefore, he seems to have believed that there is a period between death and final judgment during which prayers for the deceased are efficacious before God. It cannot be believed that Paul intended this declaration to be only a figure of speech or an expression of hope. When he says, “May the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord...” he is *praying* for Onesiphorus – hoping that the Lord will hear his prayer of petition for him.

Belief in the efficacy of prayer for the dead (suggesting the possibility of atonement for sin after death), became a regular part of church life in the first four centuries. According to Mark Galli:

Praying to the saints began with the practice of praying *for* them. Any Christian who died was remembered in prayer, and services took place on the third, seventh, ninth, thirtieth, and fortieth day after death. For martyrs, annual remembrances of their death were celebrated and called “birthdays,” the day the person was born into heavenly life with Christ. Soon churches drew up lists of martyrs, believing that prayer for martyrs was of “great benefit to those for whom it is offered” (Cyril of Jerusalem). Origen said praying for the dead attested to the living unity of Christians in heaven and on earth—the communion of saints.⁴³

As noted above, there was a belief -- not only in late Judaism, but also in the thought of Jesus, Saint Paul, and the Early Church – that there is a period after death – but preceding final judgment – in which the deceased could be helped in their path toward salvation. It is unlikely that the early Church believed that this “time and opportunity to be helped toward salvation after death” extends to those who intentionally and unrepentantly choose to separate themselves from God and the Kingdom of love (see the doctrine on hell in Chapter Eight above). Though all things are possible for God in his unconditional and unrestricted mercy and love, there is a need for all people to freely choose and accept that mercy and love through sincere repentance.

⁴² See Robert Wild, S.J., 1990 “The Pastoral Letters” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Prentiss Hall) p. 900.

⁴³ Mark Galli 1993 “Worship in the Early Church” in *Christianity Today*, Issue 37, (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-37/>).

Both Scripture and the Church affirm the unconditional love and mercy of God and his intention to forgive and save those who have faith in him and sincerely repent for their sins. The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-32) and the repentance of the Good Thief (Lk. 23: 39-43) clearly indicate Jesus' intention to do this. In Matthew 18: 10-14 (The Parable of the Lost Sheep), Jesus concludes:

And if he finds [the lost sheep], truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

Jesus' use of the emphatic *ego* – “truly (amen) I say to you...” (solemn declaration) – in this passage shows the definitiveness of his declaration that it is not the intention of his Father that “one of these little ones should perish.” The Father's will is that no one who goes astray -- and allows himself to be rescued -- should perish (suffer eternal death). Jesus' declaration of the sufficiency of repentance for salvation is also manifest in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Lk. 18: 9-14). When the tax collector (a very serious sinner in First Century Judaism) with his head bowed and beating his chest prays “Have mercy on me for I am a sinful man,” Jesus declares that he went home justified (ready for salvation).

Saint Paul also expresses the same confidence in God's salvific intention through Jesus Christ. He views it as inconceivable that God would refuse salvation to someone who has faith in his Son and is sincerely contrite for his sins, because if God gave us his only begotten Son to redeem us, why would he withhold anything else from us if we in faith call upon his mercy. In the Letter to the Romans, he proclaims:

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? (Rom. 8:31-35).

So if Jesus, Saint Paul, and the early Church believe that even the most errant sinner (e.g. the Prodigal Son, the Good Thief, and the Tax Collector) would be granted eternal salvation through sincere repentance, why did they simultaneously hold that prayers for the dead would be helpful toward salvation? If the sincerely contrite will be able to enter the kingdom of heaven through the unconditional mercy of God, then why would there be any need for prayers to help them toward salvation after death? Wouldn't God's forgiveness and mercy be enough to bring them immediately into the Kingdom?

Saint Paul gives us a helpful clue to answering these questions in the Letter to the Romans:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold into slavery to sin. What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I concur that the law is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that good does not dwell in me, that is,

in my flesh. The willing is ready at hand, but doing the good is not. For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want. Now if [I] do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. So, then, I discover the principle that when I want to do right, evil is at hand. For I take delight in the law of God, in my inner self, but I see in my members another principle at war with the law of my mind, taking me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Miserable one that I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal body? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom.7:14-25).

In this passage, Saint Paul recognizes two dimensions within his inner being – the spirit and the flesh. He also recognizes that within his spirit, he fully affirms the goodness and saving power of Jesus – and is sincerely contrite for the evil he admits to doing in his flesh. We might adduce from this that he has fulfilled the essential requirement for justification (readiness for salvation) by having faith in Jesus and being sincerely contrite for his sins. If he were to die at that moment, Jesus would extend his mercy and salvation to him in the same way he did for the Good Thief. However, Saint Paul also recognizes that he is not ready to enter into the kingdom of unconditional love, because there is something within him that is still resisting (and even rebelling against) his spirit of faith and sincere contrition.

What would have happened if Saint Paul had died at that very moment? On the one hand he would have fulfilled all that is required to receive the mercy and salvation of Jesus (in his spirit). Yet, on the other hand, he would not be ready to enter into the unconditional love of Jesus' kingdom because he would still be disposed to certain evils (in his flesh). Paul does not indicate in this particular passage whether he believes in a period after death when purification of the flesh (bringing the desires of the flesh into conformity with those of the spirit) can be *freely* chosen (in concert with God's grace). Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to hypothesize that this had occurred to him. After all, if there were no such period of purification after death, how could someone (like himself) who had fulfilled the requirements for justification inherit the kingdom when they had not yet *freely* (and with the grace of God) chosen to align their disordered desires with their authentic ones. Whether Saint Paul thought of this or not, he apparently affirms in 2 Tim. 1: 16-18 – along with Jesus – the existence of an intermediary period between death and heaven in which atonement for sin and prayers for the deceased can be efficacious for salvation.

The common practice in the early Church of praying for the dead indicates that an implicit doctrine of purgatory had been percolating in its collective consciousness for many centuries. If the early Church did not believe in efficacious purification of desire (through free choice and God's grace after death), then prayers for the dead would have been incoherent – but this was clearly not the case.

So what might we say about this doctrine today? We must assemble the same four puzzle pieces as Saint Paul and the early Church:

1. If one has faith (trust) in God and is sincerely contrite for sin, then Jesus will extend his unconditional mercy and salvation to us – we will be justified (made ready for salvation).
2. Yet if some of our desires are in tension with (or even opposed to) our good, loving, and faith-filled intentions after our death, we will need some opportunity to freely work with

the grace of God to bring our disordered desires into line with our good ones – after our death. Otherwise how could we enter into the kingdom of unconditional love where everyone is capable of loving perfectly (free of all egocentric, narcissistic, and dominating interference)?

3. As might be adduced from our experience in the world, the process of letting go of inordinate desires is both challenging and painful (even with the help of God's grace). Sometimes we need the stimuli of deprivation and pain to help us choose what we know to be the right course of action toward our salvation. Why would we expect this process of purification to be any different in the life to come? Thus, we might expect that purgatory will include both difficulty and pain.
4. As noted above, late Judaism, Jesus, Saint Paul, and the early Church believed in the reality of a period after death – before judgment (and entrance into the kingdom of unconditional love) where forgiveness (according to Jesus in Mt. 12:32) and atonement for sin can occur, and where prayers for the dead can be efficacious for salvation.

When we put these four pieces of the puzzle together, we arrive at the definition of purgatory given by the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

All who die in God's grace, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven (CCC 1030).