He was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became fully human
The Nicene Creed

_Incarnation_ comes from the Latin word _incarnare_ meaning 'to express or embody in flesh'. It refers to our belief that Jesus held together, in one person, complete humanity and complete divinity; that he was truly God and truly human.

So how did the Church arrive at that conclusion?

The Bible confronts us with two seemingly contradictory facts about Jesus - he is truly and fully human and he is truly and fully God.

Jesus was human

There can be little doubt that Jesus was fully human.

The Gospels record that he was born of a woman; that he displayed human needs - hunger, thirst, tiredness; and human emotions - anger, sorrow and wonder. He felt pain. And he did what all human beings must do, he died.

We note that his understanding was limited. He admitted that there were some things he didn’t know and couldn’t know. His understanding was that of a first century Jew. (see Mark 13:32)

The fact that he spoke with great authority and was able to do things other people could not do does not detract from his humanity. Indeed the scriptures suggest that it is the rest of us who are somehow incomplete; that Jesus was truly human; human in a way the rest of us ought to be.

So there seems little doubt that Jesus was truly and fully human, a kind of prototype of God’s purpose for all men and women.

Jesus was God

The first Christians never hesitated to make this bold claim.

In Jesus, the first disciples believed they met the Living God and when Thomas came face to face with the risen Jesus he exclaimed, ‘My Lord and my God’, a title which the risen Jesus was prepared to accept.

But the Church has never found this an easy belief and over the past 2000 years there have been many attempts to water down the bold assertion that Jesus was God.

It has been called the most scandalous assertion of Christian belief and perhaps it is. To say that Jesus was truly and fully human and truly and fully God would seem to be logically inconsistent. Yet that is the witness of the scriptures and the experience of Christians down through the ages.

Putting the facts together

Our problem lies in trying to reconcile these two facts of Christian experience.

It’s like trying to draw a map of the world on a flat surface. The earth is a sphere so it can’t be accurately reproduced on a flat surface. But, for convenience sake, maps must be reproduced on flat surfaces. An atlas meets the problem by giving us two different maps of the world. One is contained in two circles, representing two hemispheres; the other is contained in an oblong (Mercator’s projection). Each is a map of the whole world but they contradict each other, to some extent, at nearly every point. Yet both are needed and, taken together, they correct each other.

We must approach the doctrine of the
Incarnation in a similar way.

We say that Jesus was human and that Jesus was God. The two statements would seem to contradict each other. Yet both are necessary and, taken together, they affirm a fundamental truth about Jesus; that in Jesus the man we encounter the person of God.

The miraculous birth

The Creeds say two things about the birth of Jesus: he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and he was born of the Virgin Mary. What do those two statements mean?

When we say Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit we mean that Jesus had no human father because he was the beginning of a new creation. Jesus was a new Adam; God's new initiative in human life.

It does not mean that sexual reproduction is sinful and that it therefore had to be excluded from the birth of Jesus. That is a pagan, not a Christian idea. There is nothing in the Bible to suggest that sex, in itself, is sinful.

Then the Creeds claim that Jesus' mother was a virgin.

There are those who say that the story of the virgin birth should not be taken literally. They point out that neither Saint Mark, Saint John nor Saint Paul mention the virgin birth; that there are similar legends about the birth of great men in other religions; that God does not make a habit of breaking the rules of nature; and that therefore the story of the virgin birth is probably a beautiful legend which bears witness to the importance of the birth of Jesus.

Others find it hard to dismiss the story so easily.

They point out that the biblical accounts in the gospels of Saint Matthew and Saint Luke are quite explicit and quite independent and that the silence of Saint Mark, Saint John and Saint Paul may well attest to that fact that belief in the virgin birth was so universally accepted by the early Church that it demanded no special attention.

An interesting reference in Saint Mark's Gospel supports this contention. In Mark 6:3 Jesus is called 'the son of Mary'. Nowhere else in the Bible or in other contemporary literature is a man designated as the son of his mother.

They also point out that the story has no real parallel with the pagan legends which are usually of a later date and, if anything, are based on the Christian story.

The Virgin Birth of Jesus does present us with some problems. But if the story isn’t true, why did Luke and Matthew bother to include it in their Gospels?

Perhaps the best argument in favour of the Virgin Birth is the difficulty of accounting for the story other than on the assumption of its truth.

Think about it

_The nativity mystery 'conceived from the Holy Spirit and born from the Virgin Mary', means, that God became human, truly human out of his own grace. The miracle of the existence of Jesus, his 'climbing down of God' is: Holy Spirit and Virgin Mary! Here is a human being, the Virgin Mary, and as he comes from God, Jesus comes also from this human being. Born of the Virgin Mary means a human origin for God. Jesus Christ is not only truly God, he is human like every one of us. He is human without limitation. He is not only similar to us, he is like us._

- Karl Barth. _Dogmatics in Outline_

_Moreover, the fact that the Son of God became man through being conceived by the Holy Spirit and being born of the Virgin Mary, that is, not of the will of the flesh nor of the will of a human father, but of God (John 1:13), means that at this decisive point in the incarnation the distinctive place and function of man as male human being was set aside._

- Thomas F. Torrance