

What did Jesus know?

Question: I recently read the portion of the Gospel about what will happen at the end of time. It stated, "But of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mk 13:32, also in Mt 24:36). Did Jesus not have unrestricted knowledge?

– Name and city withheld

Answer: The question of Jesus' human knowledge has been discussed by theologians for millennia. There are two views that are inadequate. One is that Jesus knew absolutely everything and, since he was divine, had knowledge of all things in heaven and on earth. Thus even as an infant he would have complete and unlimited knowledge.

At the other end of the spectrum is the modern view that Jesus knew nothing more than any other human being and had to figure everything out for himself. Even his relationship to the Father and his mission on earth would have been a quandary for him. Some would hold that Jesus lived his whole life in a state of confusion.

The more adequate position is that Jesus was aware of his unique relationship to the Father and of his mission to bring salvation to the world. The Gospels provide ample evidence that Jesus knew who he was and knew what he had to do to bring about God's reign. However, on ordinary matters, Jesus' knowledge was gained by experience like everyone else. Jesus probably did not know that the earth was round, that the American continent existed or the insights of modern science.

There are two Scripture passages important in this matter. The first is from the Gospel of Luke: "He went down with [Mary and Joseph] and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. ... And Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man" (2:51-52). Jesus was like any child in that he had to be

instructed. In Joseph's carpenter shop, he probably learned his trade from Joseph in the way that any young man would. His mother, Mary, would have had to instruct him in human wisdom.

The other passage is from the Letter to the Philippians: "Though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross" (2:6-8).

The point is that when the eternal Son of God took on human flesh, he took on the limitations of humankind, except that of sin. He deliberately embraced the condition of not knowing, of having questions, of needing instruction.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: "This human soul that the Son of God assumed is endowed with a true human knowledge. As such, this knowledge could not in itself be unlimited: It was exercised in the historical conditions of his existence in space and time. ... [Jesus] would even have to inquire for himself about what one in the human condition can learn only from experience" (No. 472).

When Jesus cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46) he was not play-acting. This was a moment of real agony, a moment in which he knew nothing but the condition of being forsaken. If Jesus knew everything about his suffering, death and resurrection beforehand, then he would not be sharing in the condition of human suffering and abandonment, which he had freely chosen.

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