

REFLECTIONS ON THE CREED

written by Rev. Anthony Barratt

SOME INITIAL THOUGHTS...

In this chaplains' reflection for our Order, we are going to explore together the profession of faith, or *The Creed*, that we say together at Mass on Sundays and important feasts in our liturgical calendar. Our English word "creed" comes from the first word in the Latin version of the Creed "credo": literally, "I believe". The Creed has been said by billions of Christians over many centuries and all over the world. So then, what is the Creed, where did it come from and why is it so important to us?

To begin our reflection, it is good to remember that the Creed we recite together is not just a statement about our belief in some sort of set of ideas or concepts, but rather a belief in something or someone *personal*. The Creed is about our belief in God (one God, yet three persons...the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) and in God's life revealed to us and given to us personally. We believe in and we love a personal God. So, when we say "I believe", we are not just offering some sort of opinion or making a statement about a subject like math, history or geography. No, we are actually making a choice, a decision and saying "yes" to the truth. In this sense, the Creed is also about who we are, how we wish to live and what we hope for.

Sometimes, the language of the Creed can seem to be difficult or puzzling. One thing we do need to recall is that the Creed was written some 1600 years ago in a time and place that was both very different from ours and yet also very similar. Language and customs then could be quite different and yet the early Christians faced many issues and concerns, and had hopes and joys that we would certainly recognize today. The Creed can remind us of how our Christian faith is both unchanging and yet how it can grow and develop.

In the early Church, there were many statements of faith; often called *symbols of faith*. These were often recited by those adults preparing for baptism. We still use these symbols today, for example when we act as a godparent for an infant, or when we renew our baptismal promises at times such as Easter, or when a person is installed as a new parish leader. They usually take the form of a series of questions that summarize our faith and we respond to each question with a firm 'I do'!

However, there were a number of crises and challenges as the early Church struggled to find a language to articulate the Christian faith. So at several Church councils (or meetings of all the bishops) between 325 AD and 451 AD, a Creed was developed so that Christians everywhere could profess one, common faith. This is the Creed that we still use today, taking its name, *the Nicene-Constantinople Creed* from two of those councils that took place at a city called Nicea and at Constantinople (modern day Istanbul). We also have a shorter *Apostles' Creed* that we are encouraged to use at Masses in certain seasons, or that can be said when we pray the rosary.

The Creed is important to us because it is a summary of our faith and also, as we have already seen, because it is a choice and a decision to believe and to live what we believe. Interestingly, the

Creed along with the “Our Father” are both presented to catechumens in the RCIA program, to symbolize two pillars of being a Christian: belief and prayer. The RCIA instruction puts it well when it states that “the Church lovingly entrusts to them the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, the ancient texts that have always been regarded as expressing the heart of the Church’s faith and prayer.”

As we conclude this introduction to the Creed, perhaps we can reflect on one, final matter. There is always a danger that we can say the Creed (or indeed pray the Our Father) on auto-pilot; just rattling the words off without thinking about them or taking them to heart. Hopefully, our exploration of the Creed can help us to avoid this and, indeed, to think about the words, to savor them and so to deepen our faith. So, having looked at a few introductory matters, let us now begin to unpack the Creed by exploring each of what are called the main “articles” of the Creed, that is what we say about God, the Father, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Church...

“I BELIEVE IN GOD, THE FATHER”

When we say together that we believe in *one God*, we go right away to the heart of our faith in the Trinity, the central mystery of our faith (cf. *Catechism of the Church* n. 234). We believe that God is indeed one: there are not three gods, but one God in three persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). So far so good, but perhaps we are saying yet more. When the Creed was first devised, many religions had a large number of gods. The early Christians wanted to show their belief in the one, true God. Maybe we also need to do the same today, for there are many “gods” around: money and wealth, power, success or even just plain old me!

Sometimes the title “God” can seem too remote or like an idea and so our Creed then uses another, more homey or familiar word: *Father*. This is an analogous word, but central and fundamental. It is the name that Jesus used of God, his Father, or “abba” (dad), many times in the gospels (54 times, to be precise!). We too say this word every time we pray the Our Father. God is indeed our common Father and we are made in His image and likeness; we are His daughters and sons through our baptism. So, in speaking of God, we are also reminded of who we are and that we belong to one family.

We then jump from a familiar title to one that is rather more fearful (in the biblical meaning of this!) as we also believe that God is *Almighty*. God is all powerful, totally other, beyond all our imagining. We are reminded of how truly awesome God is. Although we can struggle with the language at times, many of revised prayers in the Mass also remind us of this, with words such as “majesty”, or “gracious”, or “Lord”.

We then add that God is also the *maker of heaven and earth*. However much the research and the intriguing theories of science can help us to understand our world or the universe, God is indeed the Creator and the one who is the author and sustainer of life (cf. Psalm 8). In fact, an older image of God that is not so common now depicts God as a master craftsman, complete with all his tools. This can inspire us as we look at the beauty of creation or the marvel of life such as a new born baby. We can see beyond such wonderful things to our God who creates and sustains them.

Before we leave our phrase about God as Creator, there is one more reflection that we may add. Our belief in God as Creator also reminds us that, in the end, we are therefore *stewards* of God's creation. We are not "God" and we have been entrusted with much as God's stewards. This is such an important reminder for us today. Julian of Norwich summarizes all our thoughts so well. She writes: "A lady looked at a hazel nut and asked 'what may this be?' And it answered: 'it is all that is made.' In this little thing I realized three things. The first is that God made it, the second is that God loved it and the third that God sustains and keeps it."

We finish our first part of the Creed by then saying *of all things visible and invisible*. God is Creator, not just of what we can see, but of what is beyond human sight (and imagination even!). God is the creator of spiritual beings such as angels, or of our very soul. We might go even further. God is, in a way, the creator of what we might call spiritual gifts and qualities such as love, truth, goodness etc. Yes, we can see the effects of these, but they are not objects: they are both visible and invisible! God is indeed the origin and author of all that is good, true and beautiful.

"I BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST..."

Let us now move on to look at the section of the Creed about Jesus Christ. It is the longest part of the Creed because, of course, Jesus is at the very heart of our faith and because there are many questions and much to say about our Lord. In fact, the Creed was written to address many such questions and controversies about Him: for example...Who is Jesus and how can He be truly God, yet truly human? Who is Jesus for us?

Our Creed gets straight to the heart of things by establishing first that Jesus Christ is truly God, using some titles from the Scriptures that are traditionally reserved for God such as "Lord" or "Son of God." The Creed also employs a number of more technical and theological words and images such as "only begotten". This phrase means to say that Jesus was not created or made: there was never a time when He did not exist (as St. John also says in the first chapter of his Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word...and the Word was God"). No, Jesus comes from the Father before all ages: He is "God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made."

The Creed then uses what was, at the time, a sort of theological trump card and a very specialized word: *consubstantial*. What on earth does this mean...?! Well, it is a word that is really hard to translate from the original language of the Creed, but let us try. Consubstantial is really two words: con-substantial. Substantial is also, in fact, also two words in one: sub-stantial; literally meaning "what stands beneath" or what something is. "Con" comes from a word meaning "with" or "one with." So, when we say "consubstantial" it is like a shorthand way of saying that Jesus is one with the Father: He is truly God.

After this, things become easier as we move from thinking about *who* Jesus is to the story of *what* Jesus has done for us and *why*. We begin then with two, key words: "for us" and then we also add "for our salvation." We are indeed now thinking about what God has done *for us* and why: for our salvation. The Creed reminds us first of what we will soon celebrate at Christmas as we speak of how God so loved us that He sent us His only Son: "He came down from heaven...incarnate of the Virgin Mary...and became man." This reminds us that Jesus Christ is truly God, but that He is also truly human: He became man.

We then fast forward to Holy Week and the season of Easter as again, “for us,” Jesus was crucified, suffered death, was buried and rose again on the third day; just as the Sacred Scriptures had foretold. All this really took place and it happened for our salvation: Jesus is indeed our Lord *and* our Saviour. We celebrate this fact every time we say the Creed and when we celebrate the Mass together. Our God is indeed an Amazing God!

Finally, we look to the future, to the second coming of Jesus Christ at the end of time (something we shall soon be thinking about as we begin the season of Advent). Jesus will come again in glory both to judge and to establish the fullness of the Kingdom that will last for ever. In fact, each time we pray the Our Father we also express this hope (“thy Kingdom come”). Yes, it is certainly a hope for the future, but it is also a call for action *now* as we strive to be cooperators in the building of that Kingdom here and now. Even if the Kingdom will only be complete in the future, it is most certainly already present, here and now. Every time we say the Creed then, we are reminded of our present and urgent call to build God’s Kingdom, especially in the service of our sisters and brothers.

As we conclude our reflection on this section of the Creed we can realize again how the Creed is a very dense and compact summary of our faith in who Jesus Christ is: truly God, yet truly human and in what He has done for each one of us. Above all, perhaps, we can understand that our faith is not just something in the head to be learnt or studied, but also that faith is something that is lived and celebrated. We can answer Jesus’ call to be His disciples, His friends: to follow Him, our Lord and our Saviour and to bring others this same good news.

“I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT”

Now we move to the third article of our Creed that speaks about the Holy Spirit. We know that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, manifest at Pentecost and that the Spirit is given in Baptism or Confirmation. However, many of us might be a bit vague about saying much more: who or what is the Holy Spirit and what does the Holy Spirit do...? Well, we are in good company. When our ancient Christian forbearers wrote the Creed, the original version just stated: “I believe in the Holy Spirit” and left it at that! It was quickly realized that this was not enough. In fact, there were some who did not believe that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. Instead, they saw the Spirit just as some sort of mysterious divine force or power.

So, our Creed does two things: as with the section on Jesus Christ, it states *who* the Holy Spirit is and *what* the Holy Spirit does for us...

The Creed begins by using two titles: The *Lord* and *Giver of Life*. As we have seen already, the title “Lord” is taken from the Scriptures and is usually reserved to speak only of God. The Holy Spirit is also the “giver of life”: something that we read again and again in the Bible. In the Creation, the Spirit moved over the waters and breathed life into Adam and Eve (Genesis Chapter One). In the prophet Jeremiah, the life-giving Spirit is promised and in the prophet Ezekiel’s vision, the dry bones are given life by the Spirit. At the Annunciation, Mary is over-shadowed by the Spirit and it is the Spirit that raises Jesus from the dead and who descends upon the dejected and frightened apostles to give them new life and new spirit. As the Sequence for Pentecost Sunday

reminds us, the same Spirit brings us light, refreshment, courage, strength and inspiration. Yes, the Holy Spirit is indeed the giver of life!

We then leave our biblical images and employ a theological shorthand (as we did with ‘consubstantial’). We say: “the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.” This is a controversial statement, especially for Eastern Orthodox Christians, but we will have to leave that issue for now. What does this phrase mean? Like the “only-begotten” Son, the Holy Spirit proceeds or comes from God before all ages; but we also acknowledge that the Spirit comes to us from the Father and from the Son, Jesus Christ. For example, we can remember Jesus’ promise to the disciples to send the Spirit: cf. John 14: 16-17, 26 and 16: 13; Acts 16: 13.

Next we state that “with the Father and the Son He is adored and glorified.” This statement is a bit easier than the last one to unpack! Only God can be adored and glorified by us (as in our prayer, “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit...”). So, we are saying that the Holy Spirit is indeed truly God because of the adoration and glory we give. Interestingly, long before the Creed was written, it was the honor and worship given to the Holy Spirit in the liturgy that convinced many that the Holy Spirit is indeed divine and truly God.

Finally, we say something about what the Holy Spirit does: “He has spoken through the prophets.” The Spirit indeed speaks through the many prophets, both old and new that God sends. The Spirit literally *in-spires* or gives *in-spiration* and helps God’s prophets to listen to God’s voice and to speak for Him. It is also a reminder that there are prophets today as well as the classical prophets in the Old Testament. People like Saint Mother Theresa of Calcutta, or Blessed Archbishop Oscar Romero. Perhaps you know of someone in your own parish or community who truly inspires and who is very much a prophet of God. Lastly, the Creed reminds all of us of our call through Baptism and Confirmation to be prophets of God too.

So, as we profess our belief in the Holy Spirit, let us ask the Spirit to inspire us and to breathe life into us: the very life of God. We ask the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life. Like the apostles at Pentecost, may we too boldly profess our faith, both by our words and by our actions.

THE CHURCH, BAPTISM, LIFE, DEATH & RESURRECTION

We have arrived at our final article in the Creed as we explore together the last few lines of our profession of faith. They speak first of our faith in the Church and then we immediately use four words to describe the Church: one, holy, catholic and apostolic. These are often called the four “marks” of the Church: but what does each one mean? Let us think about them together...

We state that we believe in *one* Church and yet well know full well that there are many Christian denominations and also that, sadly, there are divisions within the Roman Catholic Church. So, how can we say that the Church is really “one”? It is sometimes said that the Church is indeed one, even if Christians are divided. We can remember Jesus’ great prayer that “they all may be one (John 17: 20-22) and also that Jesus founded one Church and we are called to be one in faith, hope and love. Our Creed therefore tells us of the fundamental unity or oneness of the Church and of the urgent call to heal all divisions and disunity as our Lord wishes and wills.

The Church is also called *holy*. As with saying the Church is one, this can be puzzling. Yes, there are many wonderful and holy people in the Church, but we are also aware of scandals and of our own faults and failings. So, how can we say that the Church is “holy”? As with the Church being one, it is a reminder that Jesus Christ, the holy one, founded the Church; He is the head and we are the “Body of Christ.” (cf. 1 Corinthians 12: 27). It also reminds us of our fundamental call to holiness. We become holy through living our faith in our daily lives, fed and sustained by the sacraments, by God’s word and through prayer.

The Church is also *catholic*, that is universal. The Church and its mission to spread the Gospel spans all times, places and cultures. The Church exists to help everyone to find their vocation, meaning and purpose in life and to experience and to live the universal and eternal love of God. So, we might say that the church does not so much *have* a mission, but that it *is* mission: mission is our very purpose as Christians. Quite a thought!

Finally, we say that the Church is *apostolic*, that is founded on the apostles. This is expressed especially in the ministry and mission of the Pope and the bishops who are respectively the successors to St Peter and to the apostles.

The Creed then speaks of the great sacrament of Baptism that all Christians share. This sacrament gives us so much: an entrance into the Church, the removal of sin and a new birth as daughters and sons of God. It also gives us those gifts that help us to fulfill our mission and calling as members of the Church to “go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life” or to ‘go and announce the Gospel of the Lord’ as we are commanded to do at the end of Mass.

As the Creed comes to an end we look to the future: “to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” This is not a morbid thing, but rather a celebration of the true meaning and purpose of our life here on earth: as a preparation for the life to come. As Baptism is our beginning, so also we think of our end and our true destiny: life with God and with all those who have gone before us. Incidentally, that is why we use the Easter candle both at a baptism and for a funeral (and why we sprinkle a casket with holy water): the promises and hopes at baptism, please God, are now fulfilled and completed in the passing from death to new life.

Our reflection on the Creed is also now complete. Let us take our reflections to heart, so that each time we profess our faith at Mass, we may avoid doing this on auto-pilot. Rather, may we savor the words, know and understand what we say and live those words each and every day.

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