

*Lord, you have blessed us with a rich and varied tradition. Bless now this part of our Lenten journey as we look more deeply into the story that you have invited us to enter, to live, and to share. Amen.*

Today is the third installment of our Lenten contemplative stroll through the Apostle's Creed. Having dealt with two facets of the Trinity, God the Creator and Jesus the Incarnate Word, the Creed now moves us along to consider these words: *I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.*

As we've observed so far, the Creed developed as a response to other competing schools of thought in the second century, stating in bluntly concise and propositional form what were then considered to be the bare essentials of the Christian faith. As we saw last week, the question of the dual nature of Jesus Christ, being both human and divine, was one of the major sources of conflict, and to no one's great surprise, debate over the Holy Spirit was no less enthusiastic. While some declared that the Holy Spirit was simply an *agent*, a kind of ambassador for God, others fought for the understanding of the Holy Spirit as 'person' co-equal with God and Jesus the Son. As hair-splitting or inconsequential as those distinctions might seem to us now, *then* they divided the Church into ugly factions and opposing camps. So it is interesting to realize that behind the first seemingly benign statement, *I believe in the Holy Spirit*, there was a wealth of disagreement about just what the Holy Spirit's relationship to God or as part of God, was all about. Certainly the 3-fold structure of the Apostle's Creed suggests a Trinitarian understanding of God, but it isn't until the development of the **Nicene Creed** a couple of centuries later that a concerted attempt is made to spell out the Spirit's relationship to the other aspects of the Trinity. For now, in the Apostle's Creed, it's just a statement of belief that asserts God's energizing presence among us, and recognizes that the breath that moved over the waters of creation moves in us and moves in our world still. It calls us to be alert, watchful, and open to divine revelation.

The next two phrases really belong together. *The holy catholic Church and the communion of saints* state the Christian commitment to community: that we do not live and die unto ourselves, but are members one of another ....the *Church* being the visible community of the faithful on earth, and the *communion of saints* being the faithful who now live in the nearer presence of God, but with whom we share eternal spiritual kinship. The Creed calls us to believe in a church that is *holy* - a word that is a bit of a stumbling block because we tend to confuse *holy* with *perfect*. Perfection implies uniformity, legalism, limits, controls, sameness, and an impossible standard; a *holy* church, on the other hand, sets out to be a blessing to the world - it is a church that openly engages with the great questions and concerns of every age, and tries to bring the light and compassion of Christ to bear upon them. And the Creed calls us to be a *catholic* church, which simply means *universal* - a worldwide congregation of seekers who believe in the person and the proclamation of Christ.... and who humbly offer that faith in the service of the rest of creation. And as part of the communion of saints, we commit ourselves not only to those who have shared the faith *before* us, or who now share this *present* journey of life and faith *with* us, but also those whose names are *yet* to be written in the book of life.... the generations yet unborn. To believe in the communion of saints is to accept responsibility for living a faith that will be formative to the next generation of believers.

The most beautiful lines of the Creed have been reserved for close to the end - starting with *the forgiveness of sins*. At this point, after making high and lofty assertions about our connection with the saints, we are suddenly faced with our own shortcomings. And here we are, people who overall have tremendous difficulty taking responsibility for our failures, dishonesty, selfishness, carelessness, narrow-mindedness ... you name it .... here we are, unable to count all the ways in which we fall short of the glory of God ... and we boldly state a belief in God's forgiveness for our failures. Quoting from Joan Chittister, in her book *In Search of Belief*, the Creed focuses us *not on guilt or on evil, but concentrates our attention only on the forgiveness of our Creator, who having made us, knows of what we are made; who knows our sincerity and values it over perfection; who knows our weakness and glories in bringing it to wholeness. Belief in God's forgiveness commits us to be forgiving, for it is only in exercising this divinely-given attribute that we ever really understand the forgiveness of God.*

*The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting* affirm our belief that as our beginning was with God, so is our ending.... but that our ending is in fact a new beginning. Historically it's thought that the phrase *resurrection of the body* was included in the Creed as a way to refute the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century popular belief that all matter, including our physical being, was intrinsically evil - so by including this phrase in the Creed, what was being affirmed was the eternal *goodness* of matter, of human life, and indeed of all creation. What it suggests, though, is potentially mind-boggling. Taken literally, the *resurrection of the body* can be interpreted as an opening of graves and a reviving of corpses at some undefined future point, and a return to life in an earthly paradise where all natural laws are suspended - which I suppose is a comforting thought to some; but equally legitimate (and perhaps more palatable) is the belief that life has a purpose and a quality that doesn't end at death.... so the *resurrection of the body* may not be about literally putting flesh back on the bones, but rather about the promise of life in a form that will be determined by the limitless mystery and possibility that is God. And *life everlasting* simply affirms what we already know about life from living it - that in eternity as now, we will continue to constantly transform into something new, being neither the same nor different as we experience no boundaries, and have no end.

Each week I've been concluding with an invitation to think about what the lines of the Creed mean for you, and this week is no exception. What would **you** say about the Holy Spirit, the Church and where we fit into the divine cosmic plan? Next week, as we bring this Lenten series to close, I'll be drawing it all together and sharing with you some alternate statements of faith I've come across in my reading, but in the meantime, perhaps we will see with new eyes something in these ancient phrases to feed the soul in the week ahead.

*For this opportunity to reflect on our shared faith, we give thanks to you, God our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.*

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