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The Creed as a means of Teaching and Renewal

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Each Sunday and Solemnity we recite the Creed at Mass. It is the bridge between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.¹ Although we use the first person singular and affirm that I as an individual Christian accept and believe in what the Creed proposes, it is understood to be a common proclamation of a shared faith. The Creed, whether it be the shorter Apostles' Creed or that (more commonly used) composed in its present form at the ecumenical councils of Nicea/Constantinople [AD 325/381],² is a bold statement of belief of amazing durability. There have been what we now call tweaks to the text over the centuries and the celebrated *filioque* clause continues to divide the Latin Church from the Orthodox, yet virtually all the words employed and the assertions they articulate go back to the dawn of Christianity. A public acknowledgment of the truths the Creed proposes was from earliest days the *sine qua non* for reception of the Sacrament of Baptism and thus admittance to and membership of Christ's Church.

The congregation at Mass stands while professing its faith (genuflecting twice a year, on 25 March and 25 December, at the words *and he became man*). The body posture is expressive not only of formal attention (this applies too to the proclamation of the Gospel) but also of bold confession of conviction. The Nicene Creed is frequently sung in Latin at one of the Sunday Masses in many parishes: it proceeds at a solemn, deliberate pace. When the Creed is spoken in a well conducted liturgy it proceeds at a canter rather than a trot. There is every indication that many of those who recite the Creed are contemporaneously reflecting on its

1 Roman Missal, General Introduction n. 67 - 68

2 The easiest way to track the evolution of the credal formulae is to consult *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, Revised Ed., J. NEUNER SJ & J. DUPUIS SJ, Collins London 2001, pp. 1 - 29

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words. Most Catholics, if put to it, could recite the Creed by heart, either in the version they learned preparing for the sacraments as children or in the extended version they are used to joining into at the Sunday Eucharist. A parish community that is alive and that cares about its future will always be alert to the truths it professes in the Creed and in many cases curious to re-acquaint itself with the doctrines it contains and deepen its understanding of them.

When the celebrated Dutch Catechism³ was published in 1967 one of the reasons why its impact was so immediate and its approach so fresh was not just that it was rooted in the rich soil of modern human experience but that its structure too no longer depended on the hierarchy of truths so familiar from the Nicene Creed. As if a lesson had been learned by the furore the Dutch Catechism had caused and with the Wojtyła pontificate underway, when the German bishops produced their excellent catechism in 1985,⁴ when the Belgian bishops published their imaginative catechism in 1987⁵ and then when the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC),⁶ drafted in large measure by Christoph Schönborn, now the Cardinal Archbishop of Vienna, was published in 1992 as the template of all future national catechisms, the Nicene Creed was the peg on which these magisterial catechetical instruments, universal in outreach and inspiration yet designed to be adjusted to prevailing traditions and priorities of national episcopal conferences, were hung. The link between the formula used across the Church for professing the Christian faith which enjoys a central position in the liturgy and its use as the teaching tool *par excellence* needs no apology. The Church has been well served by Pope John Paul II's insights into the vocation of the universal catechism and by the platform the CCC has provided for all catechetical initiatives prompted by the New Evangelisation. [YOUCAT e.g.]

It comes as no surprise that as the Church follows up on the sixtieth anniversary of Vatican II there should be a renewed interest in and appreciation of the Creed. Godfried Cardinal Danneels, a teacher-bishop of an eloquence, scholarship and fidelity to our scriptural heritage such as to make him comparable to the patristic Fathers, closed his great catechetical cycle of pastoral letters which spanned the years 1983 to 2009, with a remarkable meditation on the Nicene Creed. For the Archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels the

3 *A New Catechism: Catholic Faith for Adults*, Burns & Oates/Herder & Herder, London 1967

4 *Katholischer Erwachsenen Katechismus: Das Glaubensbekenntnis der Kirche*, Bishops' Conference of Germany, Bonn 1985

5 *Geloofsboek/Livre de la Foi*, Bishops' Conference of Belgium, Lannoo, Tielt, 1987

6 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Geoffrey Chapman, London 1994, pp. 14 – 242

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Creed was the ideal springboard to prayer; he drew spiritual lessons from the litany of doctrines which he described come across “dry as cork”.⁷

There is a sign that in ecumenical circles too the creedal formulae elaborated at Nicea and Constantinople are arousing new interest. A joint approach by dogmatic theologians and exegetes from the Reformed tradition is breaking fresh ground in expanding contemporary understanding of patristic Christology.⁸ Furthermore a number of Catholic theologians are returning to the Creed to examine its claims afresh through the eyes of a contemporary culture in crisis and which is so often dismissed as secular. One of the most recent, lively and fresh studies of the Creed comes from the pen of Hubert Philipp Weber, theological counsellor to Cardinal Schönborn, the theologian largely responsible for drafting the CCC.⁹

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

It takes a priest several years to get to know his flock after his assignment to a new parish. Given that Jesus is at the centre of our Christian life, I decided that my first Lent Course in my third parish should focus on Jesus of Nazareth: how we know about him, what we know about him, the salient facts about his short life, and how we keep his memory alive. My second Lent Course focused on the Creed. There was a continuity in that the Jesus of history, under the microscope last year, became now Jesus the Christ, history became Christology, preoccupation with the human in Jesus shifted to a curiosity about the divine. With the Trinity the most difficult nut for any priest who preaches to crack, the trinitarian scaffolding of the Creed helped us to widen our field of inquiry.

The Our Lady & St. Anne Lent Course itself lays no great claims to originality. Each Monday evening of Lent we had between sixty and seventy in attendance. There was a fifty-minute presentation and a ten-minute question and answer opportunity. Sixteen of the participants joined us each week from two neighbouring Church of England parishes. It was made clear at the outset that each day at Evensong in the Anglican Communion the Apostles' Creed

7 Danneels, Cardinal Godfried, *De Vreugde van te Geloven/La joie de Croire*, Press Service Archdiocese of Mechelen, 2007

8 *Die Rede von Jesus Christus als Glaubensaussage*, ed. Jens Herzer, Anne Käfer, Jörg Frey, UTB vol. 4903, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2018. These are the proceedings of an inter-disciplinary congress held in Leipzig in March 2015 on the 2nd article of the Nicene Creed and its Christological significance.

9 Hubert Philipp WEBER, *Credo: Das Glaubensbekenntnis Verstehen*, Grünewald, Mainz 2017

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is recited, that the Nicene Creed is as much part of Reformed patrimony as it is of Catholic and Orthodox, and furthermore that, not only were papal infallibility nor *cujus regio ejus religio* not up for discussion, they were not matters of faith!

The Creed itself provided the six-week topic distribution: (1) the early Christian creeds, the liturgical context in which they were first composed, the doctrinal controversies which contributed to the wording and the doctrines which have endured from Nicea to our own day; (2) the nature of faith and belief; (3) God the Father and the qualities ascribed to him; (4) the incarnate Son, the mystery of salvation and redemption; (5) the Holy Spirit and then the litany of important corollaries of the Trinitarian faith.

Those contemporary theologians who have written about the Creed have set the central doctrines of the Church in the context of the questions being asked about Christian faith today. A pastor has as one of his first duties to teach the Catholic faith to his people: week by week, following the scripture readings at Mass, he explores the spiritual and moral dimensions of the gospel message; Advent and Lent courses enable him to take a more structured approach to the deposit of faith and analyse it in response to the contemporary questions with which his people will be familiar. In both contexts he recognises that the faith is transmitted to people who, in their personal as well as their professional lives, are preoccupied with the '*joy and hope, fears and anxieties*' which are characteristic of the age in which we live today. So, setting the Creed against the backdrop of the contemporary world has always been a challenge to preachers down the centuries, perhaps never more essential than today.

The Nicene Creed dates from the fourth century of the Christian era. What sources survive from late 4th century Milan tell us the city was buzzing with conversations concerning issues of faith and theology. Arians and Catholics were often at one another's throats, the theological questions of the day were so divisive that the Emperor feared social unrest. Even if one were to dispense with hyperbole, it would still seem that people in that great metropolitan centre where Ambrose was soon to become their bishop were talking about nothing else than the nature of Jesus and whether or not he was divine.¹⁰ The same would seem to have been the case in early fifth century Hippo in the latter years of the reign as bishop of Augustine, baptised a Christian by Ambrose in 387. With Vandals threatening on every side and Rome still reeling under the devastating assault led by Alaric the Hun, everyone in the provincial

10 See Neil B. MCLYNN, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital*, University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1994, pp. 13 – 22.

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North African town was talking about how they could understand the providence of God, how they could credit the loving God their bishop had preached about so frequently with having allowed such terrible things to happen. The man on the 5th century equivalent of the Clapham omnibus was talking about God, about Christian doctrine and about the contents of religious belief in the streets, the forum, the baths and homes of Milan and Hippo in the twilight days of the Roman Empire.¹¹ That is not the case today.

Our people talk a lot about the Church. They are bemused by its internal politics, dismissive of its attempts to secure a place in the public square and shocked by the scandal of child sexual abuse and the serial denials of clerical misconduct. It is rare that questions of faith, doctrine or theology are subjects of conversation, be it across a dinner table or in a pub. In fact, a general failure to understand what the Church is, what is the nature of its mission and what its core religious beliefs are make contemporary conversations about the Church much more difficult and lead all too often to erroneous conclusions which benefit no one.

One of the remote aims of a parish Advent / Lent Course is that it might fuel or inspire such a conversation were the occasion to arise. Even if the participants do not discuss among themselves or with others the contents of such a course, given how coy all of us are about sharing our views on matters of belief, their understanding of what it is they believe in may be deepened, issues that long remained problematic for them may be edging toward resolution or their capacity to share in the transmission of Christian teaching within the home – especially in the ministry of grandparents to grandchildren – may receive a boost from their getting a better grasp for themselves on the central tenets of Catholic belief.

One of the effects of the side-lining of religion in public discourse and the growing ignorance of the Christian story more generally is that those writing about religion, the dedicated religious affairs correspondents of mainstream media and broadsheet newspapers to say nothing of those contributing to on-line websites, are themselves devoid of any active commitment to a Church community and all too frequently know little or nothing about the doctrines of the Creed let alone understanding the truths the contain or why they matter. Our parishioners are being presented with a caricature of Church and faith by those who have little or no knowledge of it and certainly no sympathy with it. Any re-visiting of the Creed and re-appropriation of its central truths will assist our

11 For the atmosphere in Hippo at the time of Augustine's death, see Peter BROWN, *Augustine of Hippo*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967, pp. 423 - 30

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people in digesting and filtering news about religion. At the very least, it may function as a corrective to the false views about what Christians believe in an age when “fake news” shows no sign of ceding the field of public debate to truth.

The only exposure our people have to preaching in today’s Church is the Sunday homily. Vatican II’s restoration of the homily to a place in the Liturgy of the Word it has not enjoyed since the twilight of the Patristic Age has been an integral feature of situating the scriptures at the heart of our Sunday liturgy. And it has proved a welcome development. Nonetheless, the homily has put paid to thematic preaching.

A series of sermons on the Creed, whether delivered by the PP in response to an episcopal mandate or by visiting Jesuits or Redemptorists during the parish mission, is a thing of the past. Hence the importance of making the Creed a theme of a Lent or Advent Course. It opens up an opportunity for on-going evangelisation of the resident parish community and equips those who attend, when they get the chance, to engage themselves in evangelisation. It may make them more confident in defending the faith or the Church when under attack, it may assist them in correcting the misapprehensions about Catholicism so prevalent in all of today’s media and it may invite a fresh commitment on their part to a faith which is personal – hence the *I believe* – but which they always recite in a chorus of fellow believers. The profession of faith which is the Creed is a powerful and eloquent articulation of solidarity across the universal Church of those who believe that our God has revealed himself to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The need for stillness. Too many of us learn to ‘love’ distress and anxiety: we say it is the way of work and the world. Just five minutes of silence seems pointless. But we get in touch with the ‘inner teacher’ when we find times to be still in our day, connecting us with deep peace and balance. It is available to be tapped into as we live in the moment: talking to people, working on tasks, walking with a fresh breeze on our faces, even running.

– GAVIN THOMAS MURPHY, *Bursting out in Praise* (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p.13.