

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE APOSTLES' CREED -- 1.

The Reverend Canon John A. Hollister

Background of the Three Historic Creeds.

For the first two hundred years of the Church's existence, or until the 300s of our era, the Church got along without any formal, official statement of its Faith other than the formulae that were developed in different local churches for use in new members' sacramental entry into the Christian community. These "baptismal symbols" were short, simple declarations of the faith of the Church to be recited publicly by a new member, just prior to his or her baptism. This showed he or she had been properly instructed in, and fully accepted, "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints"¹ and handed down by the Apostles.

By the Fourth Century AD, however, bitter controversies arose in various parts of the Church over the precise way Christ brings to us the presence of God. The field of theology that examines what we know about Christ is called "Christology" or "Christ-study".

In these controversies some held, as the mainstream Church has always held, that Christ is at once both truly human and truly divine. He has two complete natures, one fully human and one fully divine, united indissolubly in one person. This complex concept is nothing more than an attempt to state, in inadequate human words, a divine mystery that is really far beyond our comprehension.

Many people not only could not grasp this incomprehensibility, but even more importantly, could not accept that ultimately they could not know everything that was involved when God chose to assume human form and come among us. This coming among us is the mystery called "the Incarnation" that we celebrate with the feast of Christmas. "Incarnation" comes from

the Latin and simply means “enfleshing” or “becoming flesh”, *i.e.*, in a human body.

Those who were dissatisfied with the traditional understanding of the majority of the Church – with what we call the “orthodox belief” – were mainly two groups. One emphasized Christ’s humanity in ways that diminished or discounted His divinity, saying things like “He was an extraordinarily gifted and inspired man but he wasn’t really the same as God”. The other group emphasized His divinity at the expense of His humanity, saying things like “Since He was truly God, He only seemed to be human, rather as if His human body was just an Halloween or Carnival costume.”

Of course, these mistakes in belief and teaching, called “heresies”, did not end with the Fourth Century. They have been with us throughout the history of the Church, even down to our own day. Periodically, they recur and almost always involve one or the other of the same errors: an intense focus on Christ’s humanity or on His divinity, in either case to the virtual – sometimes express – exclusion of His other nature.

In the Fourth Century (300 AD to 399 AD), the Archbishops, Bishops and other leaders of the Church tried to resolve these Christological disputes by following the model set out in Chapter 15 of Acts of the Apostles. There, we read how, after Christ’s Ascension, a serious dispute arose in the Church about whether it was enough for new converts to the Church to be baptized as Christians or if they also had to be circumcised as Jews. The Apostles, whom Christ Himself had called and appointed, dealt with this by meeting together in a council, presided over by St. James “the brother of Our Lord”.² They believed this meeting, as a formal expression of their Office as Apostles, was guided and governed by the protecting care of the Holy Spirit.

This belief – that the Holy Spirit would lead His Church to the truth whenever it gathered in humble prayer for guidance

– follows Christ’s promise to His Apostles and Disciples that, after His Ascension, the Holy Spirit would come to His Church and remain with it until the end of the world, *i.e.*, until His Second Coming:

And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter [*i.e.*, Strengtheners], that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.... But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.³

Therefore, during the Fourth Century and to resolve the urgent controversies over the natures of Christ, the Church held two important Councils of its Bishops, who it believes are the direct successors to, and inheritors of the office of, the Apostles. So St. Paul wrote to St. Timothy, “This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. A bishop then must be blameless... [o]ne that ruleth well his own house, ... ([f]or if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)”⁴ Thus, too, he said to his protégé, St. Titus: “For this cause I left thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting [in the local churches], and ordain elders [*i.e.*, priests] in every city, as I had appointed thee: If any be blameless ... [f]or a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God...”⁵

The most famous of these Councils was that held in the city of Nicea in Asia Minor (now Turkey) in 325 AD. The Fathers of that Council addressed the controversies over Christ’s true nature (or, more correctly, natures) by formulating a statement of what the Church believed and had always believed. As a starting point, they took the only concise statements of the

Faith known to them, which were the “baptismal symbols” used in some of the major local churches such as that at Jerusalem.⁶

Called a “Creed” from its opening word in Latin, “Credo” or “I believe”, this statement of belief is used in both the Western and Eastern Churches. The form we use now is not the precise form of words agreed by the Fathers of the Council of Nicea because the next Council⁷ refined the original to make it more difficult for teachers of incorrect doctrine to misinterpret what the Fathers of Nicea had declared was the Faith of the Church.

Because this Creed states the Faith declared at the Council of Nicea to be the Faith of the “orthodox” part of the Church (literally the “correctly believing” part) this statement is traditionally called the “Nicene Creed”. For many centuries now, it has been recited as part of the Mass or Eucharistic Liturgy⁸ in all Churches that consider themselves to be “Catholic”.⁹

A second related, but shorter, statement has come down to us that is used primarily in the Western Church, where it is called the “Apostles’ Creed”. It has this name *not* because it was written by the Apostles, for it was not, but because the Church agreed that it stated the Faith as held and handed down by the Apostles. For many centuries, the Western Church has recited this declaration of the individual worshipper’s faith in the Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer.¹⁰

There is a third, even longer traditional statement of belief that was drafted somewhat later and is called the “Athanasian Creed”.¹¹ That title is similar to that of the Apostles’ Creed in that this statement was not actually written by St. Athanasius, who is the “Doctor” (teacher) of the Church we remember for upholding the true Trinitarian teaching against almost unimaginable difficulties and oppressions.¹² Rather, this Creed is intended to express, in a way that is very difficult to misinterpret, the precise beliefs about the Holy Trinity that St. Athanasius

² It is worth noting that, while St. Peter delivered an important speech to this Council, Acts 15:7-11, it was not he but rather St. James who both formulated and announced the decision of this Council, Acts 15:13-21.

³ St. John 14:16-17, 26 (KJV).

⁴ 1 Timothy 3:1-2, 4a, 5 (KJV).

⁵ Titus 1:5-11 (KJV).

⁶ We have now come a full circle and use the Creed itself as this “baptismal symbol”: “*Minister.* Dost thou believe all the articles of the Christian Faith, as contained in the Apostles’ Creed? *Answer.* I do.” *The Ministration of Holy Baptism*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 276 (PECUSA 1928).

⁷ The First Council of Constantinople, or Constantinople I, held in the city of that name in 381 A.D.

⁸ The Nicene Creed appears in the *Mass or Order for the Administration of the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion* on page 71 of THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER (PECUSA 1928).

⁹ Despite what many think, the word “Catholic” is *not* a trade name of the Roman Church. Rather, it means “universal” and properly describes *all* of the Churches that (1) descend from the one, undivided Church that existed everywhere in the then-known world prior to the “Great Schism” of 1054 AD and (2) maintain the historic male Apostolic ministry and the traditional Sacraments that, according to Christ’s covenant promise, objectively convey to their recipients the presence of God.

¹⁰ The Apostles’ Creed is found in those Offices on pages 15 and 29 of the American version of THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER (PECUSA 1928).

¹¹ This was probably formulated and adopted in Southern Gaul (France) in about the mid-Fifth Century.

¹² Among other hardships, for his steadfastness in defying officially sponsored errors of belief, he was exiled from his Patriarchal See of Alexandria by one or another Roman Emperor *on five separate occasions*.

¹³ Which was, of course, the only Prayer Book used in England’s North American colonies from 1662 until 1783 and in the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America from 1783 through 1789.

¹⁴ *E.g., Quicunque Vult*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 21 (Church of the Province of South Africa 1954).

¹⁵ A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 21 (CPSA 1954).

¹⁶ The similar but not identical list of required days given in THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER (Church of England 1662) is: Christmas, the Epiphany, St. Matthias, Easter, Ascension, Whitsunday, St. John Baptist, St. James, St. Bartholomew, St. Matthew, SS. Simon and Jude, St. Andrew, and Trinity Sunday.

30 For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess : that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man ;

31 God, of the Substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds : and man, of the Substance of his Mother, born in the world ;

32 Perfect God, and perfect man : of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting ;

33 Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead : and inferior to the Father, as touching his manhood.

34 Who although he be God and man : yet he is not two, but one Christ ;

35 One; not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh : but by taking of the manhood into God ;

36 One altogether; not by confusion of substance : but by unity of person.

37 For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man : so God and man is one Christ ;

38 Who suffered for our salvation : descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead.

39 He ascended into Heaven, he sitteth on the right hand of the Father, God Almighty : from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

40 At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies : and shall give account for their own works.

41 And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting : and they that have done evil into ever-lasting fire.

42 This is the Catholick Faith : which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son : and to the Holy Ghost ;

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be : world without end. Amen.

defended before the first important Council as being the orthodox (“rightly-believed”) faith.

The Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds are easily found, because they appear (the Apostles’ Creed twice) in the American BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER. The Athanasian Creed, however, is more difficult to find unless one has access to the 1662 BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER of the Church of England¹³ or a traditional Prayer Book from one of the other Anglican Provinces. Therefore, for easier reference for those who may be unfamiliar with it but curious about it, it is reprinted at the end of this note.

In the Church of England and therefore in many Anglican churches around the world, this Athanasian Creed is directed to be recited at Morning and Evening Prayer on a dozen or so important feasts through the year, such as Trinity Sunday. In 1785 the American church -- for no very good reason that we can discover -- omitted the Athanasian Creed in the American BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER and it remained absent from all subsequent editions in this country through that of 1928. However, it remains part of the English Prayer Book and also of several others that have official standing in the Anglican Catholic Church.¹⁴ Thus some of our parishes follow the English custom in using it on the days traditionally appointed for it.

¹ Jude 3b (KJV).

QUICUNQUE VULT¹⁵

*A Confession of the Christian Faith, commonly called
the Creed of St. Athanasius*

*The following Canticle shall be said, either in place of the
Apostles' Creed or as an Anthem, at Morning or Evening
Prayer on Trinity Sunday. It shall also be said at Morning
Prayer, in place of the Apostles' Creed, upon these Feasts
(except when they shall fall on a Sunday); Saint Andrew,
Saint Thomas, the Conversion of Saint Paul, Saint Mattias,
the Annunciation, Saint Mark, Saint John Baptist, Saint
James, Saint Bartholomew, Saint Matthew, Saint Simon
and Saint Jude.¹⁶*

WHOSOEVER will be saved : before all things it is neces-
sary that he hold the Catholick Faith.

2 Which Faith except every one do keep whole and
undefiled : without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.

3 And the Catholick Faith is this : That we worship one
God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity ;

4 Neither confounding the Persons : nor dividing the Sub-
stance.

5 For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son :
and another of the Holy Ghost.

6 But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Ho-
ly Ghost, is all one : the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal.

7 Such as the Father is, such is the Son : and such is the
Holy Ghost.

8 The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate : and the Holy
Ghost uncreate.

9 The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible :
and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible.

10 The Father eternal, the Son eternal : and the Holy Ghost
eternal.

11 And yet they are not three eternals : but one eternal.

12 As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three
uncreated : but one uncreated, and one incomprehensible.

13 So likewise the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty :
and the Holy Ghost Almighty.

14 And yet they are not three Almighties : but one Almight-
ty.

15 So the Father is God, the Son is God : and the Holy
Ghost is God.

16 And yet they are not three Gods : but one God.

17 So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord : and the
Holy Ghost Lord.

18 And yet not three Lords : but one Lord.

19 For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity : to
acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord ;

20 So are we forbidden by the Catholick Religion : to say,
There be three Gods, or three Lords.

21 The Father is made of none : neither created, nor begot-
ten.

22 The Son is of the Father alone : not made, nor created,
but begotten.

23 The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son : neither
made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.

24 So there is one Father, not three Fathers ; one Son, not
three Sons : one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts.

25 And in this Trinity none is afore, or after other : none is
greater, or less than another ;

26 But the whole three Persons are co-eternal together : and
co-equal.

27 So that in all things, as is aforesaid : the Unity in Trinity,
and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped.

28 He therefore that will be saved : must thus think of the
Trinity.

29 Furthermore, it is necessary to everlasting salvation :
that he also believe rightly the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus
Christ.