

## A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE APOSTLES' CREED -- 3.

The Reverend Canon John A. Hollister

**I BELIEVE in God the Father Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth:**

*And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord:  
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of  
the Virgin Mary: Suffered under Pontius Pi-  
late, Was crucified, dead, and buried: He des-  
cended into hell; The third day he rose again  
from the dead: He ascended into heaven, And  
sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Al-  
mighty: From thence he shall come to judge  
the quick and the dead.*

**I believe in the Holy Ghost: The holy  
Catholic Church; The Communion of Saints:  
The Forgiveness of sins: The Resurrection of  
the body: And the Life everlasting. Amen.**

**“And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord....”**

The second segment or phrase of the Apostles' Creed deals with *Jesus Christ the Son of God*, who is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. Firstly, we should note that “Jesus” is His *name* and “Christ” (or more properly, “The Christ”) is His *title*. “Christ” is derived from the Greek words for “the Anointed One”, for which the Hebrew term is “Messiah”. This title, in all of its forms, refers to the One whose coming was foretold in many of the Old Testament prophecies, particularly by Isaiah.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, while we are all the sons and daughters of God, when we state that Christ is “his only Son our Lord”, those capitalized words indicate a theological concept. When we show our acceptance of this concept by reciting the Creed, we expressly acknowledge that He has a relationship with God the Father that is vastly different from our own.

He is, in fact, also God<sup>2</sup> in the same sense and to the same degree as is God the Father (and, indeed, as is God the Holy Spirit) and He is the only Person who has ever had precisely this special relationship with the Father. God thought the best way to describe this great mystery in human words was to use the ordinary terms “Father” and “Son”, but we should never think that, because we understand what those words mean in human families, we also understand the fullness of the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity.

Finally, when we describe Christ as “our Lord”, we are, of course, acknowledging His right of lordship, that is, His right to rule over us as an earthly sovereign rules over a kingdom. We are acknowledging more than that, however. To the ancient Hebrews, the *Name* of God<sup>3</sup> was so especially sacred that it was never pronounced out loud. Instead, when reading their Bible (which was, of course, our Old Testament), pious Jews *substituted* for that Name the title “Lord”.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the very first Christians, who were themselves believing Jews, followed that same custom. Thus, to them, to ascribe to Christ the title “Lord” was a clear declaration of His similarity to God the Father, a similarity amounting almost to identity, and therefore of His truly divine status.

**“Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary....”**

In the third section of the Creed we avow that Christ “was conceived by the Holy Ghost” (or Holy Spirit)<sup>5</sup> and that He was “Born of the Virgin Mary”. When we say this, we attest that His birth into a human body, the mystery we call the Incarnation (or

---

<sup>7</sup> It must be noted, however, that while Christ shared the common human experience of being *tempted* to sin, He never *gave into* those temptations. Instead, He remained completely without sin, which is why He is able to share with us His victory over sin just as He is able to share with us His separate but related victory over death.

<sup>8</sup> There are other miraculous conceptions recorded in scripture, as when Sarah gave birth to Isaac, Genesis 21:1-2, and when Hannah bore Samuel, 1 Samuel 1:20. As with Christ’s birth, each of those was in fulfillment of a promise. The difference was that in each of those other cases, the promise concerned was only made to one woman or to a married couple, not to a whole nation, and the difficulty the miracle overcame was a problem of normal biology, such as infertility by reason of age, not an impossibility, such as the absence of the half of the genetic requirement that the father normally contributes.

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 41:14.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 42:1.

<sup>11</sup> Isaiah 7:14.

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 49:1.

<sup>13</sup> Again, however, a body that suffered temptation but not sin. *See note 7 supra.*

<sup>14</sup> As the Nicene Creed says, He was “Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God”, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 71 (PECUSA 1928).

<sup>15</sup> We call this concept “monotheism” which is just a term with Greek roots that means “one god-ism”.

<sup>16</sup> Religions with multiple gods, where each god is usually identified with a certain force of nature or a certain geographic place, are called “pantheistic” religions and are among the most common forms of paganism.

when He sent His Son to us in human form. At last, we were given an intermediary between God and man whom we could trust completely.

Because Christ shared -- and shares -- our human natures, bodies, and life experience, we are assured He knows us inside and out. At the same time, because He shares God's all powerful and eternal nature, we are assured He possesses the ultimate truth can lead us to the union with God that we call "salvation".

In other words, the mystery of the Incarnation was (and is, because it goes on continuously) not something *God* needed for Him to be able to deal with us -- after all, He made us and so knows us as completely as we can be known -- but instead is God's gracious concession to *our* human limitations, especially our limitations in vision and understanding. God did not *need* to come to earth as a human person; *we* needed Him to do that for us.

---

<sup>1</sup> E.g., Isaiah 9:6-7; 28:14-29; 48:16-20; and especially chapters 53 & 61.

<sup>2</sup> This is one of the points that the Nicene Creed takes pains to state more clearly and unmistakably than does the Apostles': "And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God; Begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God; Begotten, not made; Being of one substance with the Father; By whom all things were made...." THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 71 (PECUSA 1928).

<sup>3</sup> Since in ancient Hebrew only the consonants were written and not the vowels, and because through nonuse the original pronunciation was forgotten, all we know for certain about this Name is the four consonantal letters, YHWH. Scholars think it may have been something like "Yahweh" but it certainly was *not* "Jehovah".

That was a translators' error that combined the consonants of the Name "YHWH", which the Hebrews never said out loud or even read silently, with the vowels "EOI" or "EOE" of the word "Elohim", "Lord", the title which they piously substituted for the forbidden Name. The result, transliterated into English, came out approximately as "YeHoWiH". In some European languages, such as German, Y and J are easily interchanged, as are W and V. Thus 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Century English translators accidentally coined the neologism, "Jehovah".

<sup>4</sup> In Hebrew, "Elohim" or "Adonai".

<sup>5</sup> "Ghost" is just an obsolete English word for "Spirit". Thus to refer to the ghosts of the departed is to refer to their spirits.

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 7:14 (KJV). Cf. St. Matthew 1:22-23.

"enfleshing"), was a miraculous event caused by God's own direct and voluntary action.

The miraculous nature of this event is shown by the manner of the conception of Christ's human nature and human body in His mother's womb -- the very human start of their growth and development. This took place *with* the participation of a human mother, which is the only way a human being can be born. Thus Christ's birth to the Blessed Virgin Mary certified the truly human quality of His being.

However, that conception also took place *without* any contribution by a human father. Instead, God, acting through His usual agent in this world, the Holy Spirit, caused that conception to take place in a unique way that would have been impossible for mere biology. This aspect of His conception preserved the truly divine quality of His being while it also fulfilled the predictions of the Scriptural prophecies about the Messiah: "[T]he Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."<sup>6</sup>

The result was, and is, Christianity's unique Mediator and Advocate, at once truly human and truly divine. Thus we can accept that He is able to understand our human needs and miseries because we know that He shared them. Because He both shared them yet is God, He is able to supply those needs and alleviate those miseries.<sup>7</sup>

In turn, to prove that no human father had any participation in this process, and therefore that it could only have occurred through divine intervention, the human mother concerned was a virgin, that is, a woman who had never had sexual relations with any man, even with the man to whom she was betrothed (or as we would say, her fiancé). This made it impossible that she became pregnant by normal human means, thus certifying that it could only have happened through a special divine intervention.<sup>8</sup>

For the people who first received this revelation, the Jews of Roman-occupied Palestine, it was carefully cast in terms of the

scriptural prophecies that defined the Saviour for whom the ancient Jews had long waited. Thus the prophet Isaiah told the Hebrews that God would send them a “redeemer, the Holy One of Israel”,<sup>9</sup> who “shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles”,<sup>10</sup> and that He would appear among them when “a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (or “God is with us”).<sup>11</sup>

This is an obvious reference to the Blessed Virgin Mary’s giving birth to Christ, *i.e.*, both to His divinity and to her virginity which was the evidence of that divinity. According to the prophet, that Redeemer Himself certifies this to Israel with the words, “The Lord hath called me from the womb; from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name”.<sup>12</sup>

Why is it important that we make the affirmation of Christ’s divinity that is contained in this third section of the Creed? This miraculous conception is the way we know that, from the time of His conception, Christ did indeed share both a completely human nature and body,<sup>13</sup> inherited from His human mother, with a completely divine nature, which He had from the beginning of all things.<sup>14</sup>

This unique duality of two natures united in one Person is not necessary on God’s side for God to be able to do all the things He wishes for us and for our salvation. It is essential, however, for our limited human vision to accept God’s boundless love, that such vision has an object on which it can focus and which it can, to some extent, understand.

It is Christ’s humanity that gives us the ability to perceive Him as real and, in a limited way, to understand Him. (His humanity was also necessary in order for His Sacrifice on Calvary to be an actual, *i.e.*, bloody, one which alone could be sufficient to make reparation for the sins of the whole world.)

***These concepts, of Christ’s simultaneous human and divine natures united in one Person and of His consequent perfect fitness to be our Mediator and Advocate with God the Father, are the most central ideas in all of Christianity.*** These ideas make

our Faith different from every other religion in human history, even from every other religion that believes in a single supreme god<sup>15</sup> as opposed to a legion of variously empowered gods.<sup>16</sup> Even the two great monotheistic religions that share a common heritage with Christianity depend on *prophets* to bridge the awful chasm between humankind and deity; neither Judaism nor Islam appeals to a divine intercessor with either YHWH or Allah.

These prophets were completely -- and sometimes lamentably -- human men and women, each of whom was called and inspired by God to speak His message to His people. Each, however, retained all his or her original human fears, weaknesses, and shortcomings. Because none of these prophets was himself or herself divine (that is of the nature of God) it was always possible for the hearers of their prophetic messages to dismiss them as the mere ravings of lunatics or confidence tricksters.

Judaism’s long history of the prophets sent to the Hebrews by YHWH forms the backbone of the Old Testament. Islam believes that Allah sent the line of Jewish prophets which ended with Jesus, but that Jesus himself was merely another inspired human. It believes Allah then sent Mohammed, the last and final prophet, whose sayings were collected in the Koran.

Whether the Old Testament’s Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, Elijah, or Elisha, or whether the Koran’s Jesus or even Mohammed himself, all these prophets were, even in Jewish or Muslim claims, never more than great human leaders. Even their most fervent believers and followers see them only as humans like you and I, not as gods or even as godlike.

A religion built on the concept of human messengers or prophets speaking to other humans on behalf of God may very well appear able to deliver God’s saving message. Our deeply human uncertainties and weaknesses, however, usually lead us to doubt that any human teaching, no matter how reasonable and sensible it sounds, is really the answer to what is wrong in our lives. It is this human short-sightedness and pig-headedness that God addressed