Chapter 12

The Church

The final part of the Creed is the discussion of the on-going nature of God. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) places this section under the teachings on the Spirit, which should tell us almost everything we need to know. The Church is not merely a building designed by humans to try to keep `the kids quiet on Sundays or make them be good until Christmas. The life lessons learned are more than those from Kindergarten, with all apologies to Robert Fulghum. If we profess God as Father, then we acknowledge the *on-going* creative power of God; if we profess God as Son, then we acknowledge the *on-going* salvific event of God; if we profess God as Spirit, then we acknowledge the *on-going* sanctification of God. The Trinity accomplishes all things in concert and the Church is the human vessel of each of these activities of God.

The Words

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| ***Nicene Creed*** | ***Some Biblical References*** |
| *I believe in one,*  | Mt 16:18; Eph 4:5 |
| *holy,*  | Eph 5:27; I Pt 2:5, 9 |
| *catholic,* | Mk 16:15; Col 1:5-6 |
| *and apostolic Church.*  | Acts 2:42; Eph 2:19-22; Rev 21:14 |
| *I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins*  | Acts 22:16; Eph 4:5 |
| *I look forward to the resurrection of the dead*  | Jn 5:28-29, 11:24; Acts 24:15; I Cor 15:12-49 |
| *and the life of the world to come.*  | Mk 10:29-30; Rev 21:3-5, 22:1-5 |
| *Amen.*  | Ps 106:48 |

God And Church

What is the relationship between God and His Church and why is it important to profess it? It is certainly impossible to speak about the Church without bringing in the Son and the Spirit. If the Son and the Spirit are both God then the Father is intimately involved in the workings of the Church. Jesus himself established it; the Holy Spirit guides and sustains it; the Father gave Jesus as ransom for it and gave the Spirit as its advocate. If the Church were not important to Him, then why go to all of the trouble? Through Jesus and the Spirit God has an intimate, loving relationship with His Church. The Church, then, is an integral part of the Economy of Salvation. It is therefore impossible to understand God and the Economy of Salvation without the Church.

The Problems

But that is not the nature of human nature. The nature of the Church, its structure and its authority, as well as its purpose spawned various and sundry responses. People separate the love of God from the established religion which professes, ministers, and spreads that love. They also describe the relationship between God and Creation not as a unity but as a division. As we have (hopefully) seen thus far, this is reflected in most of the heresies, and therefore within the structure and wording of the Creed.

Picked from its humble beginnings she still uses the term “home church”, *domus ecclesia*. It speaks to the intimate nature of the Church. Not as a huge institution but as a gathering of family. The term “*ecclesia*” reflects the nature of God’s relationship to humanity throughout history. It literally means “*to call out*” but “*assembly*” or “*convocation*” are the more common translations. The use of the word speaks to God’s *gathering* action, and is heavily used with the Sinai Covenant. God selects, God choses, God gathers (“*To you all flesh must come*” – *Ps* 65:3; *Is* 2:2, 66:23; *Mt* 23:37; *Acts* 2:17…just to name a few instances). The Church specifically took on this term to describe itself.

But many challenge the nature of the Church and this description. The Gnostics believed that the most important Christian doctrines were reserved for a select few. The Creed reflects the orthodox belief that the fullness of the Gospel was to be preached to the entire human race. Hence the term "catholic" (*universal*) to distinguish the Church from the Gnostics. But they are not the only groups. From the beginning there were disputes about who can be part of the Church and how initiation was to be accomplished. Eventually there was a challenge to who could *stay* in the Church as well.

**Ebionites** (~1st-2nd): This is an early problem which was “settled” at the Council of Jerusalem mentioned in *Acts*. Basically, and logically, it was composed of Jews who insisted that Jesus was a physical messiah and not divine. So to follow Jesus one would still have to be Jewish and follow Jewish religious law and rites. The difference being that their understanding of that practice was in light Jesus' teachings on the Law. They were really separate from both mainstream Judaism and from the Church.

**Montanism** (2nd): We have spoken of these guys before, but as a reminder, and specific to this section, they touted a new "Church of the Spirit" and that they enjoyed the direct inspiration from the Holy Spirit. They then were the true Church and any Christians who fell from grace could not be redeemed.

**Gnosticism:** Most Gnostic sects focused on enlightenment, the secret knowledge which lead one beyond this world and sin. As with Plato, ignorance, not sin, was the problem. So enlightenment was what signaled who was saved and who was not, the differences were in how one achieved that enlightenment. Whatever way they taught, it reflected this Platonic notion of sin and so the Church’s claims to the power of and the need for forgiveness were unknown to them. In addition, their Platonic non-material meant that they totally rejected any idea of the resurrection of the body. And so anything associated with the material world had no value in this quest. A physical Church of all believers also failed to meet their expectations.

**Novatianism** (3rd): Novatian, a Roman priest who eventually became an antipope, was appalled by Pope Cornelius’ acceptance of lapsed Christians back into the fold. What started out as a schism on differing ideas became a heresy when his rigid moral theology caused him to declare that anyone who had committed a serious sin (*mortal*) could not find way back into the Church – ever. He refused to give absolution to such sinners (especially murderers and adulterers) which effectively cut off sinners from the sacraments.

**Euchites/Messalians** (Late 4th): the word means "those who pray." Among several other issues they had, their main focus was for the believer to reach a state of perfection, free from the world, passions, and appetites. They taught that this state is attained solely by prayer and not through the Church. This of course removes the need for any specific Church trappings or functions. Baptism (or any of the sacraments), any rituals or liturgies, have no effect on the influence of evil body and world on the soul. Only constant and ecstatic prayer released one from the passions and appetites.

**Donatism** (4th-5th) Starting in Carthage it held that the effectiveness of a sacrament for someone depended upon the moral character of ministers of the sacrament. They also felt that sinners cannot be true members of the Church or even tolerated by the Church if their sins are publicly known. Donatists were “*rigorists”*, meaning that the holiness of the Church depended upon its members. That meant that everyone in the Church had to be saints. No sinners allowed. They were especially hard on the priests and bishops who had recanted and returned forgiven to posts of authority. Any sacraments, such as baptism, administered by them were invalid.

**Pelagianism (**Late 4th-5th): Pelagius (355-425) was an un-ordained but very ascetic monk from somewhere in the British Isles. Among other things, he argued against the teaching on Original Sin because God created us good, and so we had the power of free will by which we can avoid sin. God’s grace, as such, came “built-in” for us in the form of our free will, which was formed by the Law of Moses and the teachings of Jesus. Any “fall” that occurred happened only to the individual, in the first case Adam and was not transferred to all. Infant Baptism was therefore not really needed for cleansing of sin because infants were all born good. Our own efforts save us or damned us.

The Solutions

So we can see that overall, the controversies are about the question of “who can be/is saved?” In a broader sense it comes down to who can be part of the Church, the elect, the remnant of Israel, the chosen few. You can see then why the Creed considers it necessary to profess the Church to be so important to the understanding of God and His plan. If salvation is only for the few, what does that say about God?

The relationship between God and His people must therefore be laid out with as much care as the relationship between the persons of the Trinity. The *CCC* describes the relationship thusly:

* *The* People *of God*
* *The* Body *of Christ*
* *The* Temple *of the Holy Spirit*.

Each of these is fairly self-explanatory. The Scriptures use all of these images and titles to talk about the relationship of God to His people, the Church, from its inception with Israel to its presence today. The arguments come down to the intimate type of relationship that we have with and through the triune God. Again, if we do not profess all of these persons then the Economy falls flat. So the profession of the Church is also important to re-inforce the teachings on the Trinity. God reveals not just himself as Father, Son, and Spirit, but also through each person in the assembly. [But their very revelation shows us that God is triune and that each person has to exist for the Church to make sense.] The Church must also exist as it does because of the nature of the Trinity. Nothing can be separated.

People often joke about the “smells and bells” when it speaks about the nature of the Church. It emphasizes the engagement of the whole person, physical *and* spiritual. The Catechism tells us “*The Church is in history, but at the same time she transcends it*.” (*CCC* 770) Like God, she is part of history but at the same time beyond history. This emersion (Gk: *baptizo*) in God is important to explaining the mystery which is the Church. As the Trinity is mystery so the Church is mystery. There is a physical and a spiritual side to the Church and the dual nature of Christ is the dual nature of the Church.

As the “Body” of Christ it is not surprising then that there is emphasis on the role of the Church in not just gathering together but administering the forgiveness of God. The Creed stresses the connection between the Trinity and the Church, especially the love of the Father, example of Jesus, and the actions of the Spirit.

That Is Going To Leave A Mark

The Creed lists four aspects or “marks” of the Church. That is to say, it is by these *marks* that you will know her. Each one is important because they are the proof of all of the teachings and revelation about the mystery of God. They are permanent signs, specific and purposeful actions by God which reveal the salvation He has provided to Creation. We are the purpose of Creation and God’s love. The Church is the way God accomplishes salvation in the world and it is also the end goal of salvation. Everything is linked.

One

It is our source that makes us one. As God is one, so we are one. As the two halves of Jesus are one, so we are one. One not just in place but in spirit, practice, and the Faith. We profess “*one body and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all*.” (*Eph* 4:4-6) It all goes together. The one God we profess at the onset of the Creed makes one at the end of the Creed.

Holy

It is our source which makes us holy. As God is holy, so we are holy, because the Church is not the members within it but the holy “Body of Christ” which contains flawed, human, actors. Our holiness is manifest in our saints, who let the light of Christ shine through them.

Catholic

Our source is catholic. The term *catholic* means *universal*. As God is everywhere at all times, so we are in all places at all times. Certainly there is a physical presence throughout the world, but the presence of the Spirit is everywhere, and we, as the Body, go where the Spirit is. We also profess a universal Faith that covers everything we need to know for salvation. We profess that faith in all languages, to all peoples, at all times.

Apostolic

Our foundation is Apostolic. Everything we know is finalized within the Apostolic period. The Church traces its existence through authority to this period. God has given authority to His Apostles (*Jn* 20:23) and they, in turn, passed that authority on to others. “*And what you heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will have the ability to teach others as well*.” (*2 Tim* 2:2; *1 Tim* 4:14; *Acts* 14:23; *Tit* 1:5, among others) This is also part of the apostolic aspect of the Church. Not only did the apostles teach and guide the Church but their Tradition continues on and is not lost.

Baptism And Forgiveness

Which brings us back to this: *It’s the economy…*. When we look back at the Old Testament and then we look specifically at Jesus’ message then we understand that when Jesus establishes the Church, he commissions it to continue the will of God – that everything should be completed in God. If it is the will of God that all be saved and brought into the Kingdom then these two aspects are vital. Salvation is accomplished through the Church because one is part of it and one can remain part of it no matter what.

This section is all about how one gets in and then how one stays in. To be baptized is to be immersed into the Trinity (cf. *Mt* 28:19), into the life of the Trinity. We receive the love and forgiveness necessary to live as Children of God. That is the nature of God and so it is the nature of the Church. Baptism and forgiveness are integral parts of reaching eternal life.

The Resurrection And Life Everlasting

And so, this is really the beginning of things. New Spirit-filled life in Christ is the final gift of God to us. But it is more than that – we are raised to new life. It is what makes sense of all that God has revealed to us. The Sadducees of Jesus’ time rejected the idea of resurrection[[1]](#footnote-1), and Jesus challenged them on it. It is the act of overcoming death which shows the full meaning of Jesus’ life and death for the remission of our sins. “*Jesus, the Son of God, freely suffered death for us in complete and free submission to the will of God, his Father. By his death he has conquered death, and so opened the possibility of salvation to all men*.” (*CCC* 1019)

Docetists rejected the physical body and physical death of Jesus and therefore a physical resurrection. The ramifications of this are that we are not fully saved, that is, there is no redemption of the whole person. The human body of Jesus is necessary for our redemption. Our death though, like his, is not an end. The life creating/giving/restoring nature of the Trinity does not allow for that. The death of Jesus would be meaningless without the Resurrection which followed it. Our deaths would be meaningless without the fulfillment of heaven which follows it. Death of that type would make life meaningless. (cf. *1 Cor* 15)

Teleology

Which leads us to the end of things. Our purpose, our end, is to be with God. Why else would God create us? Our death must lead us to God. The Church, in all its modes, is that place where the Economy of Salvation is both contained and expounded. The Church exists here on Earth, in Purgatory, and in Heaven. It is part of the plan to get us to the end we were created for, to be with and in God.

We decide our own end, by living our purpose. Sin has brought death into the world. That death has two forms: eternal life and eternal death. The sinner dies forever, unable to share in the life of God. We must seek communion with the Assembly, participate in the healing power of love and forgiveness it possesses as gifts, and reach glory in the resurrection of the dead, to live forever with God. That is our purpose, to do the will of God until such time as we can spend eternity with Him. While the Church is filled with individuals, this is not something alone. This is something accomplished by the community, the assembly of God, the *ecclesia*.

The end of our physical bodies is not their end either. While they may decay, we await the new body, which like Christ’s will be transfigured and know no corruption. We will rise like him and rise with him. So our “end” is not really the end but the beginning of something which will start with every tear being wiped away and continue past eternity. The World too will, like our bodies, pass away and, like our bodies, be replaced with something new. This is the world to come, one that will be the fulfillment of all of God’s promises to us.

“*At the end of time, the Kingdom of God will come in its fullness. Then the just will reign with Christ forever, glorified in body and soul, and the material universe itself will be transformed. God will then be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28), in eternal life*.” (*CCC* 1060)

Putting It Together

When looking at the Creed as a whole, we must see it as a whole, even in its parts. There is no division in the Faith and there is no purpose in separating out its parts, except to help us understand them as whole. The Truth is not something we can piecemeal together from our own limited experience. That is the first benefit of the Creed: the Truth, laid out simply and powerfully.

We may want to fight the Truth of the Faith through our own reason or emotional judgment, but the Creed reminds us to look away from ourselves and toward God. It reminds us to live in wonder and awe of mystery, not wallow in the limitation of human knowledge and pride. It calls us together, to be one in mind, heart, and spirit – that is, to be like God. We profess this truth of joy and life to ourselves and to others that all may be one, as God is one. That all might be saved and live in God. And that is the second benefit of the Creed: the focusing of our minds and hearts toward God for the salvation of all.

The nature of the Economy of Salvation is continuous. There is not a “before” and an “after”, there is one long creation, salvation, and inspiration event, and the Creed expresses that. What God has revealed in the past is just as relevant as what He reveals today. We do not become smarter and suddenly understand any better than did Peter, or Augustine, or Ignatius, or Elizabeth Ann Seton, or John XXIII, or John Paul II. The Truth is the Truth, and it is ageless, timeless, unbounded by physical or rational limitations.

 *“Ignorance is no reason to believe ignorance.”*

**Anonymous**

1. That is why they were sad, you see…. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)