

This is What we Believe

THE CREED
and
THE LORD'S PRAYER

Lit 39

Simon P. Kyambadde

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Of the many creeds that have been formulated in the history of the Church, two are most outstanding. The Apostolic creed is used in ordinary prayers, while the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed is used in the liturgy of the Eucharist. The analysis that follows these texts is of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed normally used during the celebration of the Eucharist.

To what extent does the praying of the Creed meet the intention of the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council? To what extent do the people really understand what they profess? I do believe that people who underwent Christian initiation and who have henceforth practiced their faith do have a good understanding of the articles of faith. When they say “I do” to the interrogation of the priest on Easter night during the renewal of baptismal promises, they both understand what is asked of them and at the same time mean what they give as answer. However, for all of us a deeper understanding of the meaning of the articles of faith we profess every Sunday contributes to our fuller, more conscious and more active participation in the liturgy. For those who have not studied theology (and also for theologians who may have forgotten) a prayerful study of the Creed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church would be an excellent means of this deepening. In parishes and other Christian communities, arrangement can be made to have people meet regularly to study and discuss the content of the Catechism. Below are summarized reflections on the content of the creed as a way of promoting more conscious and more fruitful celebration.

THE CREED

I BELIEVE IN ONE GOD THE FATHER, THE ALMIGHTY, MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH, OF ALL THAT IS, SEEN AND UNSEEN

“I”... “WE”....

Within many missals two versions of the Creed are given: one in plural and another in singular. Each of these stresses an aspect of the faith. One particular worshipping community may choose to use one in preference to another.

I believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

The profession of the faith in the plural stresses the fact that we worship as a community. We are united in love. The faith we profess is the faith of the whole Church. We are happy and proud to belong to this unity. On the other hand, the use of the singular brings to light the fact that ultimately everyone is answerable for his conduct and beliefs. Every person is unique. Ultimately everyone will decide his or her destiny. No one can believe for me, even though others can help me in my journey of faith.

“I BELIEVE...”

The expression ‘to believe’ has two shades of meaning. We believe when we consider as true something we ourselves have not experienced, basing ourselves on the testimony of another whom we consider credible. I believe the date of my birth,

because I trust in the credibility of my parents, not because I read the calendar and took note of the date on the day I was born. Secondly, ‘to believe’ is to be willing to risk on the basis of the assurance of a credible other. I send money by Western Union, not because I will follow it each step of the way, but because I trust in the trustworthiness of this financial institution. “By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go.” (Hebrews 11:8 cf. Genesis 12:1-4). Abraham trusted that God who called him was reliable.

To believe in God is to believe that whatever God says is true. At the same time it is to adapt a state of mind in which we are ready to do whatever he commands and to avoid whatever he forbids even when the consequences are beyond our vision or contrary to our reason.

“...IN ONE GOD...”

We believe that God is one because as such he has revealed himself:

Belief in the one God is professed because he has revealed himself to the people of Israel as the only One when he said, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord” (*Deuteronomy* 6:4) and “there is no other” (*Isaiah* 45:22). Jesus himself confirmed that God is “the one Lord” (*Mark* 12:29). To confess that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are also God and Lord does not introduce any division into the one God.¹

To believe in *one* God is a commitment to obey the first commandment;² it is a promise not to love any other gods apart

¹ *Compendium*, no. 37.

² Exodus 20:2-5; Deuteronomy 5:6-9.

from him. This is what Jesus affirms in Mark 12:29-30 when he quotes the first commandment: "...Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength."

Anything that assumes a place in our life that rightfully belongs to God is idolatry. The inordinate love of wealth, of power, of women (or men), the exaggerated love and concern for one's beauty that drives some people to spend excessively; all these are forms of believing in and serving other gods.

"...THE FATHER..."

God is "Father." The description is an aid to human beings to understand the loving nature of God. We can understand the tender love of a good father, especially if we were privileged to have such a father in our childhood. But in fact God's love by far surpasses that of the best human father or mother or spouse. He is love by nature (1John 4:16). We are allowed to call God our Father because Jesus has taught us to do so, and, much more than that, has made it possible for us to become God's children and share his life which begins on the day of our baptism.

"...ALMIGHTY..."

"Almighty" means that everything is possible for God. At a certain stage in the journey of faith, we ask ourselves questions like: "if everything is possible for God, why does he allow this or that to happen? Why does he allow the innocent to suffer? Why does he let the wicked get away with it? Why does he not seem to listen to my prayers? We may fail to get answers to our questions and as a result begin to question the power, the love or even the existence of God, or we may grow to a greater understanding of the nature of God and our human limitations.

Everything is possible to God, even though we in our mortal and sinful state cannot fully appreciate that. The more we mature in our faith in, and love of God the more we appreciate that.

“...MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH...”

The first sentence in the bible states: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1.) How long ago was “the beginning,” what was there before this beginning, how God actually created these realities, what in fact are the “contents” of the heavens (for we have a fairly good picture of the contents of the earth); these are questions that have intrigued the mind of mankind from time immemorial. Some have come to think that the biblical accounts of creation are unscientific myths, especially because they have some similarity with creation myths of other primitive cultures of the time. Some Christian denominations interpret the biblical accounts as excluding any scientific discoveries on the origin and development of nature. Some non-Christians consider biblical accounts of creation as having been superceded by scientific theories of origin and evolution. What is the truth?

In the beginning God created all that we see, and all that we don't see. When God created human beings, he gave them the capacity to understand more and more the nature of the rest of his creation. With time our understanding of the world around us has changed. Few still believe that the earth is flat, that the sun is the biggest object in the sky just because it appears so, that the moon is the second in size and then follow the stars. Few think that “heavens” consist of that which can be seen by the human eye. The simplest telescope shows how mistaken that concept is.

Believers who pick interest to know more about the physical universe cannot help becoming awestruck with the corresponding immensity of the one who brought it into being. It is awe-inspiring to know that the earth which to us looks so big is an infinitesimal speck of dust when taken on the scale of the universe. Even if we compared it to our nearest star, the sun, it would be the size of a full-stop at the end of this sentence, where the sun is the size of a football. And yet there are millions of stars in a galaxy, and there are millions of galaxies, and so on. We would be equally enthralled by how long these realities have been around; that if their age were to be compared to the time the hour-hand of a clock a complete rotation, the existence of all human history would be a fraction of a second.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... and I believe in God, the Father the almighty, creator of heaven and earth. This is what I profess when I recite the Creed.

“...OF ALL THAT IS, SEEN AND UNSEEN...”

God is the creator of the tiniest bit of matter, the atom, with its constituents of neutron, proton and electrons, as well as the biggest super-galaxy, and all that lies between. He created all the things that are invisible due to the limitation of our faculties – things that are perceptible to the senses but which are either too far or too small to be detected by the most sophisticated human instruments. But he is also the creator of the imperceptible world which is beyond any scientific instruments.

The greatest brain surgeon can open up the skull, might examine some brain tissue with the most advanced scientific instruments. He or she may observe the growth of a brain tumor, or correctly diagnose that the brain is in perfect working condition. However, no surgeon is likely to know by looking at the brain alone, what the person thinks, feels, remembers, loves, hates,

fears, aspires too, believes or is skilled in. And yet even the greatest skeptic cannot deny the reality of these things, for they are part of every normal human being. The invisible world is a very real world, for we can perceive part of it within ourselves. But we cannot perceive the whole of our spiritual nature, much less can we perceive the non-sensible realities outside of ourselves. Yet all these are part of God's creation.

I BELIEVE ONE LORD JESUS CHRIST, THE ONLY SON OF GOD, ETERNALLY BEGOTTEN OF THE FATHER...

Of the five parts of the Creed, that regarding the Lord Jesus Christ takes by far the biggest part. This is simply because he as God incarnate has revealed God to us. Because through him

I believe one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father. Through Him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation, He came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit He was born of the Virgin Mary, and became Man. For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate; He suffered, died, and was buried. On the third day He rose again in fulfillment of the Scriptures; He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end.

God has more directly intervened in human history, therefore there are more historical details to describe this intervention.

The articles regarding God the Son constitute a summary of the

Paschal Mystery. To recite them attentively is to call to mind the central mystery celebrated in the whole of the Church's liturgy.

...I BELIEVE ONE LORD...

The term "Lord" as used in the bible designates God as Sovereign. Jesus ascribed it to himself and revealed his divine sovereignty by his power over nature, over demons, over sin, and over death, above all by his own resurrection. The first

Christian creeds proclaimed that the power, the honor, and the glory that are due to God the Father also belong to Jesus: God has “given him the name which is above every other name” (Philippians 2:9). He is the Lord of the word and of history, the only One to whom we must completely submit our personal freedom.³

...JESUS...

Many cultures believe that there is something prophetic in a name. Conscientious parents take pains to choose names with a meaning or value they would wish to be reflected in the life of their children. Often in the scriptures people who received a calling also received a new name to designate the new vocation. Abram’s name was changed to Abraham, Jacob’s to Israel, Simon to Peter, and Saul to Paul. The Church continues this practice in the use of baptismal names that designate a new life in Christ and in the company of the saints who are already incorporated in him.

The name “Jesus” which was given ‘from above’, that is, through the announcement of an angel, means “Savior,” thus signifying his identity and mission. The angel explained: “...because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Peter spoke of it thus: “There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we can be saved.” (Acts 4:12).⁴ The name of Jesus is so powerful, that Jesus himself instructed his disciples, “If you ask the Father anything in my name, he will give it to you.” We even have a day in the calendar on which we celebrate the holy name of Jesus, and this is the 3rd of January. Of this name St. Alphonsus said: “This holy name consoles us, defends us, and

³ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Compendium*, no. 84.

⁴ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Compendium*, no. 81.

makes us burn with love,” while St. Lawrence Justinian said: “If you are afflicted with sickness, wearied by sorrow, or trembling with fear, if you are tempted by the devil or attacked by men, invoke the name of Jesus.”

...CHRIST...

Although we are more used to calling him Jesus Christ as if one was the family name and the other the first name, it is more appropriate to call him Jesus the Christ, where “Jesus” is the name and “Christ” is his title. “Christ” is from a Greek word whose Hebrew equivalent is “Messiah” meaning “The Anointed one.” The awaited Messiah would be anointed by God. And indeed Jesus was anointed by the Father with the Holy Spirit at his baptism. He alone has through his passion, death and resurrection brought us salvation. We are anointed with Chrism at Baptism, Confirmation and, for some, Ordination, to signify our incorporation in him, and our share in his mission.

...THE ONLY SON OF GOD...

Jesus gave us the privilege of becoming children of God and calling God “Our Father.” However, to Mary Magdalene he said, “I am going to my Father and your Father...” indicating that he is Son in a totally unique way. We are adopted through his blood, he is the only begotten. His beloved apostle John understood this very well. He tells us that “God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him”(1John 4:9) “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

...ETERNALLY BEGOTTEN OF THE FATHER...

In our present state on earth we cannot fully understand the begetting of Jesus Christ by the Father. In human terms a Son cannot be the same age with his Father. But the Father God and the Son God have both no beginning. The Son is eternally begotten by the Father. There was no moment when the Father was and the Son was not. That is why this article begins with the word “eternally.” Jesus’ sonship to the Father is beyond human intelligence alone. When Peter answered Jesus’ question “You who do you say I am?” Jesus replied to him “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 16:16-17). Similarly, it is the Father himself who proclaimed Jesus his Son both at his baptism and at his transfiguration.

The wonderful thing is that the only begotten Son has made it possible for us too to become children of his Father. We have an entire eternity to explore the relationship of the Father to the Son, as well as our own relationship to the two. We see the meaning of our status as children of God further ahead in the Lord’s Prayer.⁵

...GOD FROM GOD, LIGHT FROM LIGHT, TRUE
GOD FROM TRUE GOD, BEGOTTEN, NOT
MADE, ONE IN BEING WITH THE FATHER...

Here we touch very deep truths regarding the nature and relations between the persons of the Holy Trinity. An entire branch of the discipline of Systematic Theology called “Trinitology” is dedicated to the study of the Trinity. This is what the Church celebrates each year on Trinity Sunday, a

⁵ “**The Lord’s Prayer**
” on page 65.

celebration that puts some preachers in a certain amount of panic, recalling their own days in the seminary when they studied the doctrine of the Trinity and wondering how to present that meaningfully to the people in a few words.

To the modern believer who knows nothing of the controversial circumstances under which the Nicene Creed was formulated, some of the phrases sound repetitive. Why should one insist by saying “true God from true God” after already professing “God from God”? Again, after we have said “The only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father” why should we go on to say “...begotten not made...”?

The answer to this repetition and emphasis must be sought from the dogmatic controversies that surrounded the formulation of the Creeds. Stress was put on particular affirmation to remove any doubts from the minds of believers on areas of belief in which heretics had created doubt and confusion. Because some people believed and professed that the Father had made or created the Son, it was necessary for the Church to introduce the phrase begotten not made.” However, a detailed analysis of these controversies is not the point in this work.

Parts of the Creed like this one remind us that God is the all-other, the one whose nature we can never fully comprehend, and certainly not in this life. The acknowledgement of this truth brings humility and reverence in our hearts. At the same time, however, we must never forget the truth that God who made us in his own image, did so that we may know him, for to know him is life and happiness for us. And since our nature is ordained to knowledge of God, this is not as difficult as we imagine sometimes, for he reveals himself to us through all our faculties, not merely that of the intellect. The alternative Collect on the solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity expresses this truth beautifully:

God, we praise:
Father all-powerful, Christ Lord and Savior, Spirit of love.
You reveal yourself in the depths of our being,
Drawing us to share in your life and your love.
One God, three Persons,
Be near to the people formed in your image,
Close to the world your love brings to life.

...THROUGH HIM ALL THINGS WERE MADE

The celebration of the birth of Our Lord is provided with four Masses: the vigil Mass, Mass at midnight, Mass at dawn, and Mass during the day. Each of these Masses is furnished with a different set of readings, which portray something of the deep mystery of the incarnation.

The second and gospel reading of the Mass during the day invite us to meditate on the divinity of this little child born in utter poverty. In the gospel reading taken from the prologue of John we read: *“Through him all things came to be, not one thing had its being but through him. All that came to be had life in him...”* In the reading from the Letter to the Hebrews we read: *“...in our own time, the last days, he [God] has spoken to us through his Son, the Son that he has appointed to inherit everything and through whom he made everything there is. He is the radiant light of God’s glory and the perfect copy of his nature, sustaining the universe by his powerful command...”* The cattle and sheep that ate from the manger where he was born, the wise men from the East that came looking for him, the star that guided these men as well as all the other stars, Herod who sought to kill him, Jesus’ own mother who nursed him with infinite love, you who are reading these words: all these had their being through him and were/are sustained by his powerful command. This is what we believe and profess in that short phrase of the Creed.

All the things that God created through his Son reflect his wisdom and love, even the most insignificant. But you have to be attentive and reflective to see this. We rarely think of house flies as anything but a nuisance that carries about bacteria. But if with an eye of a scientist you studied the fly limb by limb; the structure of its very light wings and how they help it to fly, the movement of its legs which you hardly see when the fly actually moves, the sharpness of its sight, how the fly senses danger, or smells food, or propagates itself, you would be amazed. We only tend to think of many things as useful or useless because we put ourselves at the centre of the universe so that everything must be evaluated to the extent that it serves our needs and desires or does not. To a certain extent that is true of course, but there is a sense in which our self-centeredness prevents us to see the beauty of creation.

...FOR US MEN AND FOR OUR SALVATION, HE
CAME DOWN FROM HEAVEN

Evidently at the time of the formulation of the Creed, inclusive language was not an issue. It was taken for granted then, that by “for us men” was meant “for us human beings.”

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven to assume our human condition. That alone is awe-inspiring. It is awe-inspiring to consider that God who is all powerful can humble himself to be born as a weak, helpless human being, totally dependant on his mother/creature and subjected to the laws of the nature he created. That God almighty can become a human being is so overwhelming a mystery that many generations have failed to take it in. Numerous heresies have been committed that denied the humanity of Jesus. It is so overwhelming a mystery that, traditionally and according to the

rubrics in the Missal, the faithful were required to bow at these words during the Profession of Faith.

To say that Jesus became man for our salvation is a condensed truth. We need to break it down into its components. The Catechism isolates four reasons why Jesus became man:⁶

- 1) He did so to reconcile us sinners with God.
- 2) To teach us God's infinite love
- 3) To be our model of holiness
- 4) To "make us partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4).

On the solemnity of Christ the King of year B, the readings invite us to reflect on Christ's kingship in different ways. The first reading describes the scene of the last Judgment according to the vision of Daniel in which Daniel saw one like the Son of Man coming to the one of great age. The second reading is a joyful reminder that those who belong to him do not only look forward to seeing him in his glory when he comes back, but for much more: they hope to join him in his reign for he has washed our sins away with his blood and made us a line of kings in turn. But the gospel reading sharply brings us back to earth. It recalls the scene when Jesus was brought before Pilate. The universal judge standing to be judged; the king of all creation asked whether he was the king of the Jews by one who did not ask to know but to deride. To Pilate's question "so you are a king then?" Jesus answered, "Yes, I am a king. I was born for this, I came into the world for this: to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice." For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, even for the salvation

⁶ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Compendium*, nos. 85.

of Pilate. If by some divine intervention Pilate had come to the full realization of the identity of the man brought before him for judgment, he would have prostrated himself in reverence, totally flabbergasted by what was about to do. In the second reading mentioned above, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews writes: “everyone will see him, even those who pierced him...” Even Pilate who judged him to death will see him. But of course he prayed for the forgiveness of those who knew not what they were doing.

...BY THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT...

The creative power of God is active through his Spirit. This Spirit was present and active when God created the world as we read in the first chapters of Genesis. He continues to sustain his creation through the same Spirit. And so the inspired Psalmist wrote: *...All creatures depend on you to feed them throughout the year... you turn your face away, they suffer, you stop their breath, they die, and revert to dust. You give breath, fresh life begins, you keep renewing the world...* (Psalm 104:27, 29-30).⁷

God in his wisdom and power has placed in his creatures the capacity to go on propagating themselves each according to its own kind. Without intending to do so, living creatures generate offsprings. A plant produces a flower with beautiful colors, a sweet-smelling scent and sweet nectar. A bee, attracted by the scent and the colors comes to collect nectar in order to produce honey, thus preparing for lean days. It is not a conscious act on the side of the flower to hoodwink the bee, and make it carry the pollen grains on its hairy legs onto another flower, thus pollinating it. Nor does a bee decide to carry out an act of

⁷ The Jerusalem Bible adds a note: “The spirit of God is the source of all being and life.”

charity to a flower to transport its pollen in order to help it generate other plants of its kind. The very hairs on the bee's legs, and the capacity of the pollen grains to stick to the bee's legs, all seem to be designed for the symbiotic action. Bees have never convoked a meeting with plants to discuss matters of bilateral interests. They carry out their little tasks in their own interest, and in the process execute a master design of God's creative Spirit.

What is true of plants and animals is also true of human beings. Even though a man and a woman may decide to be united in the marital act in order to beget a child, the actual conception is something beyond their power to bring about. They can only hope that it takes place, because sometimes it does not. They cannot decide whether they should give birth to a girl or a boy; whether the child should be tall or short, beautiful or ugly, clever or dull, introvert or extrovert; whether it should resemble the mother or the father. Scientific research may increase the ability of human beings to influence the characteristics of their offspring – whether those research findings are applied rightly or wrongly is another matter – but science will never supplant the creative role of God's Spirit in the generation of other human beings.

...HE WAS BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY, AND
BECAME MAN...

It is true to say that all of us, all creatures in fact, come into being by the power of God's Spirit. But Jesus became incarnate in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the power of God's Spirit in a unique way. He "was born not out of human stock or urge of the flesh or will of man but of God himself" (John 1:13). The Holy Spirit came upon Mary and the power of the Most High covered her with its shadow, so that the child was holy and was

to be called Son of God.” (cf. Luke 1:35). And yet, although he became man in a unique way he is like us in all things (including our frailty) except that he did not sin.⁸ He was capable of feeling pain, fear, weakness, fatigue; of being tempted, of suffering betrayal, rejection, hatred, but also of enjoying the beauty of nature, the warmth of friendship, the love of a mother, the satisfaction of a job accomplished successfully.

...FOR OUR SAKE HE WAS CRUCIFIED UNDER
PONTIUS PILATE; HE SUFFERED, DIED, AND
WAS BURIED...

This brief sentence summarizes the passion of our Lord that lasted from the evening of the Last Supper to the moment of his death on the cross the next day. It does not mention the anguish in the garden, the pain of betrayal by one of his own intimate friends, the desertion by his disciples, the denial by the one he had chosen to be leader of the rest, the intense pain of the thorns in his temples and on his head, the terrible scourging; that masterpiece of torture invented by the Romans, the humiliation and mockery of the soldiers, the shouts of the crowds for whom he had done so much good and many of whom had shouted hosannas to him only a week before, the pain of seeing the suffering in the eyes of his mother; and the many other sufferings known to him alone.

The suffering of Good Friday was the climax of suffering that had characterized all his life. One of the great mercies of God to us is hiding from us the time and nature of our death. We who have never been condemned to death have no direct experience of what it means to live with a death sentence on your head. Even when the nature of death is as “kind” as possible, such as

⁸ Cf. Roman Missal, fourth Eucharistic Prayer.

an electric shock in a chair, or being injected with a strong poison that kills the victim in a matter of seconds; or even the guillotine of the French Revolution that chopped off the head killing the victim instantaneously; even then it must be terrible to live knowing that after so many years the day of execution will dawn. How much more terrible it must have been for Jesus to live with such a death sentence; knowing the kind of death he was to endure? As it approached he tried to prepare his apostles by telling them in a detailed enough manner to leave no doubt later on, that he knew exactly what awaited him:

Then taking the Twelve aside he said to them, 'Now we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man is to come true. For he will be handed over to the pagans and will be mocked and maltreated and spat on, and when they have scourged him they will put him to death; and on the third day he will rise again.' But they could make nothing of this; what he said was quite obscure to them, they had no idea what it meant. (Luke 18:31-34).

What is amazing is the serenity with which he lived with his death sentence around his neck. This serenity is partly explained by his love. He knew exactly why he was facing this terrible death. In the Creed this reason is given in three words: “for our sake.” His love was so intense that he actually looked forward to enduring this death in order that its fruits may be realized. This is what we gather from the words of the Evangelist: “*I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already! There is a baptism I must still receive, and how great is my distress till it is over!*” (Luke 12:49-50). The fire he talks about is the fire that is to purify and inflame people’s hearts; the fire lit on the cross. The same message is conveyed in different words in the gospel according to John. As his death is imminent Jesus declares: “*Now sentence is being passed on this world; now the prince of this world is to be*

overthrown. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all men to myself.” (John 12:31-32).

This eagerness to consummate the sacrifice must not blind us to the fact that Jesus experienced anguish in view of what awaited him. He was fully human, and as such he internally recoiled at the dreadful death that awaited him. In the same text of John 12, a few verses before we read: *“Now my soul is troubled. What shall I say: Father, save me from this hour? But it was for this very reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name!”* (John 12:27-28). The serenity with which he went to his death, therefore, is an expression of willpower driven to the limits, of courage, of heroism, and above all, of love. It is a reminder to us, that heroism is not the lack of fear, but the courage to make the right choice in spite of fear experienced on account of the pain and suffering involved in the choice.

After he had suffered, he died and was buried. Among the many Christological heresies are those that claimed that Jesus did not actually die, because God cannot die. The fact that Jesus died is another wonder of God’s doing: that his Son should be like us in all things except sin, including death. There was to be no doubt that he had died. Those Roman executioners had to ascertain that the condemned had actually died. That is why the Centurion cross-checked by piercing the body of Jesus in the heart. That is why the soldiers, broke the bones of the other prisoners, to hasten their death since Sabbath was approaching. Any possible doubt about Jesus’ death was removed by his burial. Even if a person were not totally dead, the staying in a tomb would complete the death. It is true that unlike in many cultures the body was not covered with earth, yet the wrapping with shrouds would be enough to suffocate a person who is not dead. Jesus had to walk our way; the whole of it, so that we could have the courage to follow him every step of the way. Because he actually

died, but then conquered death, we have courage not to have fear over death, knowing that it is not the end.

...(HE DESCENDED INTO HELL)

The article “he descended into hell” is found in the Apostolic and not in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Since it poses theological questions in the minds of some of the faithful, and since the Apostolic Creed is a common prayer of the Church, even though not normally used within Mass, it is worthwhile to explain this article at this point.

In our present state, the life of the Savior before the incarnation and after his death is known to us through faith, for it is beyond our earthly experience and history.

What do we profess when we say “He descended into hell?” We commonly think of “hell” as the abode of Satan, the place or state in which there is no return; of hopelessness, of torment, of eternal regret. Do we profess in this article that Jesus suffered further torment after that of his passion? The answer is no. In some versions of the Creed the article is rendered “he descended to the dead.” This is better translation for one who understands “hell” only in the sense described above. The word in fact has a double meaning. On the one hand it describes the abode and state of the damned. On the other hand “Hell” also means the abode of the dead who are deprived of the vision of God; those “under the earth” referred to in the text “...*at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth...*” (Philippians 2:10). The Catechism clarifies this second sense:

Scripture calls the abode of the dead, to which the dead Christ went down, “hell” – *Sheol* in Hebrew or *Hades* in Greek – because those who are there are deprived of the vision of God. (Cf. Philippians 2:10; Acts 2:24; Revelation 1:18; Ephesians 4:9; Psalms 6:6; 88:11-13) Such is the case for all

the dead, whether evil or righteous, while they await the redeemer: which does not mean that their lot is identical, as Jesus shows through the parable of the poor man Lazarus who was received into 'Abraham's bosom'.⁹

It is this second sense that is used in the article of the Creed.¹⁰

What we profess in this article is what we recall or commemorate on Holy Saturday; namely, the period between Jesus' death and before his resurrection. On this day the Liturgy of the Hours gives us a beautiful text for reflection in the Office of Readings. Its author is unknown, and it is simply introduced with the words "A reading from an ancient homily for Holy Saturday" followed with the title: "The Lord's descent into hell." Below is the homily in full.

What is happening? Today there is a great silence over the earth, a great silence, and stillness, a great silence because the King sleeps; the earth was in terror and was still, because God slept in the flesh and raised up those who were sleeping from the ages. God has died in the flesh, and the underworld has trembled.

Truly he goes to seek out our first parents like a lost sheep; he wishes to visit those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. He goes to free the prisoner Adam and his fellow-prisoner Eve from their pains, he who is God, and Adam's son.

The Lord goes in to them holding his victorious weapon, his cross. When Adam, the first created man, sees him, he strikes his breast in terror and calls out to all: 'My Lord be with you all.' And grasping his hand he raises him up, saying: Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light.

I am your God, who for your sake became your son, who for you and your descendants now speak and command with

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 633.

¹⁰ For further clarification see *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Compendium*, no. 125.

authority those in prison: Come forth, and those in darkness: Have light, and those who sleep: Rise.

‘I command you: Awake, sleeper, I have not made you to be held a prisoner in the underworld. Arise from the dead; I am the life of the dead. Arise, O man, work of my hands, arise, you who were fashioned in my image. Rise, let us go hence; for you in me and I in you, together we are one undivided person.

‘For you, I your God became your son; for you, I the Master took on your form, that of slave; for you, I who am above the heavens came on earth and under the earth; for you, man, I became as a man without help, free among the dead; for you, who left a garden, I was handed over to Jews from a garden and crucified in a garden.

Look at the spittle on my face, which I received because of you, in order to restore you to that first divine inbreathing at creation. See the blows on my cheeks, which I accepted in order to refashion your distorted form to my own image.

See the scourging of my back, which I accepted in order to disperse the load of your sins which was laid upon your back. See my hands nailed to the tree for a good purpose, for you, who stretched out your hand to the tree for an evil one.

‘I slept on the cross and a sword pierced my side, for you, who slept in paradise and brought forth Eve from your side. My side healed the pain of your side; my sleep will release you from your sleep in Hades; my sword has checked the sword which was turned against you.

‘But arise, let us go hence. The enemy brought you out of the land of paradise; I will reinstate you, no longer in paradise, but on the throne of heaven. I denied you the tree of life, which was a figure, but now I myself am united to you, I who am life. I posted the cherubim to guard you as they would slaves; now I make the cherubim worship you as they would God.

‘The cherubim throne has been prepared, the bearers are ready and waiting, the bridal chamber is in order, the food is provided, the everlasting houses and rooms are in readiness, the

treasures of good things have been opened; the kingdom of heaven has been prepared before the ages.’

This homily is followed by a response that expresses the faith of the Church: “Our shepherd, the source of living water, has departed. At his passing the sun was darkened, for he who held the first man captive is now taken captive himself. Today our Savior has shattered the bars and burst the gates of death.”

Christ’s descent to the dead is not in order to rescue the first pair alone, but all the good souls who hoped for salvation. The homily in a poetic way expresses the encounter with Adam, an encounter that we must assume is experienced by each of the good souls of the departed in its uniqueness and individuality. To Moses, to Deborah, to the mother of the seven martyred sons in the book of the Maccabees, to his grandparents, and to everyone Christ has different words according to how they have lived. Again the Catechism explains this all-embracing mission of Christ to the dead:

The descent into hell brings the Gospel message of salvation to complete fulfillment. This is the last phase of Jesus’ messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ’s redemptive work to all men of all times and all places, for all who are saved have been made sharers in the redemption. Christ went down into the depth of death so that “the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live...”¹¹

Here the Catechism quotes the text of John “*I tell you most solemnly, the hour will come – in fact it is here already – when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and all who hear it will live*” (John 5:25.)

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 634-635.

This is what we profess when we say of Jesus: “He descended into hell.”

...ON THE THIRD DAY HE ROSE AGAIN, IN
FULFILLMENT OF THE SCRIPTURES...

The first question a skeptic or non-believer might ask in the face of the belief in the resurrection of the Lord is “How do you know it actually happened?” To that question a believer might find himself or herself hard-pressed for convincing reasons.

In the first place those who believe must learn to appreciate and treat with sympathy the doubts of those who genuinely search for the truth. It is important to realize that it was not easy even for the most intimate disciples of Jesus to understand the resurrection. According to the Synoptic gospels Jesus had three times predicted his passion and death as well as his resurrection on the third day. But we are told that the disciples did not understand what he meant. They did not understand, in the first place because they did not want to understand. No one wants to hear that a beloved person is about to die, and to die a terrible death. Unconsciously we can refuse to listen. On the first occasion when he revealed this truth Peter remonstrated with him, and received one of the sternest rebuffs from him, for at that moment Peter represented the opposite of God’s will for him.¹² On the third occasion, when he announced his death and resurrection, no one contradicted him openly. Nonetheless they showed their lack of understanding by arguing about a trivial matter. All they were concerned with was how they would fair personally after his triumph. The sons of Zebedee wanted a

¹² Matthew 16:21-23; Mark 8: 31-33.

place, one on either side of him in his kingdom. And apparently everyone else wanted the same, for they were indignant.¹³

The disciples did not understand also because the resurrection was something never heard of. When after the resurrection of Jesus the disciples thought about his earlier predictions of his resurrection, they realized how the meaning of it was completely beyond them at the time. They had seen him raise the dead to life, such as the little daughter of Jairus and the son of the widow of Naine, and later, his friend Lazarus. But this was a return to earthly life, subject to death once again, totally different from his own resurrection. About this resurrection, they were to learn about only after the first Easter. If it was difficult for those who have lived with him to believe his resurrection, so much more difficult can it be for those who have not.

It is true that the resurrection of the Lord is a historical event with concrete proofs to support it. And yet these facts might be affirmation of the faith of one who already believes; they may not be convincing proofs for one who does not believe. Let us look at them.

1) In the first place the scriptures do not report any eye witness to the actual resurrection of Jesus. We are used to seeing in religious art a picture of Jesus coming out of the tomb in a great light, with the guards, blinded by the light falling to the ground in terror. That may have been the case, but it is not reported by any of the four evangelists. For a believer, this lack of human witness is a pointer to the transcendence of the event. God does not do things merely to satisfy human curiosity. The passing over to another life is something beyond anyone who is still in

¹³ Matthew 20: 20-23; Mark 10: 35ff; Cf. Luke 9: 43-48 the argument about who was the greatest amongst them followed Jesus' third prediction of his death and resurrection.

this life. It is only fitting that this event is hidden from human perception.

2) But then there is the fact of the empty tomb. The women disciples who came to the tomb early in the morning to complete the embalming of the body that had been done with haste due to the impending Sabbath, found the tomb empty. That is not much evidence to a non-believer. The empty tomb could have a different explanation. Perhaps his body had been taken away, as the temple guards later purported. But somehow there was something about that tomb that convinced the apostles Peter and John. They saw and believed. They had not believed when he told them he would rise on the third day. They had not believed, in spite of having witnessed many of his miracles. They had not believed, even though the two had seen him in his glorified state during the Transfiguration. But when they saw the empty tomb, they believed. Many of us have had situations in which we can say: "I cannot tell you how, and yet I am totally convinced it is true." Such was the experience of Peter and John.

There is another piece of evidence that makes the story of the empty tomb more persuasive to one who needs persuading. When the chief priests and Pharisees went in a body to ask Pilate to have the tomb guarded to prevent that "his disciples come and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' Pilate gave the permission with a tinge of irony, telling them: 'Go and make all as secure as you know how.' "So they went and made the sepulcher secure, putting seals on the stone and mounting a guard."¹⁴ This measure only made the story of the empty tomb more credible. The tomb was sealed, the guards

¹⁴ Matthew 28:1-8.

were posted, how could anyone claim that the body had been stolen?

3) There is the testimony of the women who saw a young man or two young men or two angels that told them that Jesus had risen. The persuasion of this testimony depends on whether you believe that the women had told the truth, and that they were not hallucinating. One major difficulty for some is the difference in the reports of the different gospels. But in a way this is not difficult to understand. Take any exceptional event. Have four different people write four separate reports about it. These reports are not likely to be identical but that is not to mean that they do not correspond to the truth. One may skip one detail or another. And if these accounts are to be written down after several years by people who were not the actual eye witnesses, then the variance might even be greater. The amazing thing is how God can entrust divine truth to the minds and hands of human beings with all their limitations, and how these truths are conveyed to those with faith, in spite of the human limitations.

4) There is the testimony of the manifold apparitions of the risen Jesus to his disciples. Some of them could not believe the evidence of their own eyes at first. They thought they were seeing a ghost. For their sake Jesus had to eat in order to persuade them that he was not a ghost. Thomas could not believe in the credibility of his friends when they told him, even though they were in a group. He had to see for himself. But when he did see, he became convinced. It is not hard to imagine someone who will say that, like Thomas, I too need to prove with my own eyes in order to believe.

Through his apparitions Jesus taught his disciples – and us – the nature of his risen body, to the extent that they were capable of understanding it in this present state. Of course they had no way of experiencing what it is like to be the way he was. But they

could see the outside characteristics of the resurrected, and these are described in the Catechism:

By means of touch and the sharing of a meal, the risen Jesus establishes direct contact with his disciples. He invites them in this way to recognize that he is not a ghost and above all to verify that the risen body in which he appears to them is the same body that had been tortured and crucified, for it still bears the traces of his passion (Cf. Luke 24:40; John 20:20, 27). Yet at the same time this authentic, real body possesses the new properties of a glorious body: not limited by space and time but able to be present how and when he wills; for Christ's humanity can no longer be confined to earth, and belongs henceforth only to the Father's divine realm. (cf. Matthew 28:9, 16-17; Luke 24:15, 36; John 20:14, 17, 19, 26; 21:4). For this reason too the risen Jesus enjoys the sovereign freedom of appearing as he wishes: in the guise of a gardener or in other forms familiar to his disciples, precisely to awaken their faith. (Mark 16:12; John 20:14-16; 21:4, 7.¹⁵)

5) There is the transforming power of the Spirit of the risen Christ working in those who believe him. The apostles, who, up to the end of the earthly ministry of their master were cowardly, were transformed when he infused in them his Spirit. They became heroes that were all ready to die for what they believed. So were many others after them, even up to today. Many have become convinced of the living and active presence of Christ, looking at the generous souls that, having believed, give themselves totally to him and allow him to act through them.

¹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 645.

6) Finally, there is the invitation to anyone and everyone to test and see for self, the living and active presence of the risen Lord, which was described at the beginning of this book.¹⁶

The resurrection of Jesus is what we celebrate on Easter Vigil, on Easter Sunday, and in the following 40 days until the solemnity of Ascension. It is what we celebrate every Sunday and indeed this is what we celebrate in every Mass. The liturgy, therefore, gives an opportunity much of the time, not only to deepen our understanding of and our faith in the resurrection, but also to reap its fruits for ourselves.

In conclusion we can say that there are two ways of looking at the resurrection of Jesus. We can look at it as an accomplished historical fact. On a certain day about two millennia ago it occurred. But the celebration of the resurrection of the Lord is also a constant reminder that he is alive. When Mary Magdalene could not find the tomb that Sunday morning she felt distraught. She did not have even the consolation of embalming the body of her dear Lord. I like to believe that even as she came to the tomb, Jesus was watching her, in the same way as he was watching every one of his disciples. For he was now risen, no longer tied down by the limitations of a physical body. He was not only watching her from outside, but he understood everyone of her emotions. In the same way, even as we talk of his resurrection that occurred so long ago, he is here with us listening to what we are feeling and thinking, aware of our faith or lack of it, sympathetic with us in our difficulties and struggles, hurt by our infidelities, pleased by our actions of love, attentive to our individual journeys towards our destiny, yet this does not prevent him to be present to every other human being on earth,

¹⁶ See subheading: “**Error! Reference source not found.**”on page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

and every other creature, and the company of his saints. He is here with you even as you read. You do not have to turn to left or to right, or to look ahead or behind you, for obviously you will not see him. He is aware of all your past, present and future. But what is most wonderful, is that he wants you one day to be in the same state as he is. He is looking for a chance to transform this mortal body, limited by so many things, into one like his own, and to reveal to you all the secrets that are beyond the perception of this earthly body.

...HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN AND IS
SEATED AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE FATHER

Mark and Luke give us the accounts of the ascension. Luke does so both at the end of his gospel and at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. Below are these three accounts:

“And so the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven: there at the right hand of God he took his place, while they, going out, preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word by the signs that accompanied it.” (Mark 16:19-20). “Then he took them out as far as the outskirts of Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. Now as he blessed them, he withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven...” (Luke 24:50-51). “...as he said this he was lifted up while they looked on, and a cloud took him from their sight. They were still staring into the sky when suddenly two men in white were standing near them and they said, ‘Why are you men of Galilee standing here looking into the sky? Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, this same Jesus will come back in the same way as you have seen him go there’ (Acts 1:9-11).

The ascension marks the end of the post-resurrection apparitions of Jesus. When he appeared to Mary Magdalene on the day of the resurrection, he told her that he had not ascended to the Father. Whether between then and this moment of the

visible ascension he had not yet returned to the Father, we do not know. All we know that from that day onwards his bodily appearances petered out.

The human mind which is naturally curious cannot help wondering: What really happened at the ascension? How far did he have to travel to get to heaven? How long did it take him? Where is heaven anyway? Is it an actual place or only a state of being, or both? How is it like to be in heaven? What does it mean that he is seated at the right hand of God the Father? Isn't the Father pure Spirit? Can he then have a right or left hand? How long will take Jesus before he comes?

To all these questions there is no answer. And in fact none is necessary. Perhaps one day we shall laugh at ourselves, thinking how silly such questions were. Perhaps they are as silly as when a child thinks that there are human beings acting behind the television screen.

On the other hand there answers provided from the texts of the ascension quoted above:

1. As answer to the human curiosity as to what happened when he left their sight, we receive the response given by the two men dressed in white to the disciples. "Why do you stand looking into heaven?" We shall see him come the same way as he departed. The only thing that matters in the meantime is to do what he has commanded us to do. The disciples went to proclaim the good news to the world, so must we.
2. To the question how long it will take him to come again we receive the same answer as those who asked whether he was about to establish the kingdom of Israel: it is not for us to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. (Cf. Acts 1:7)

3. The ascension did not mean that Jesus abandoned his disciples. In the account of Mark we see clearly, that while the disciples went and preached everywhere, the Lord worked with them, confirming the word by the signs that accompanied it. True to his promise, he is with us always, up to the end of the world. He gives us an answer to every question *that matters*, when we ask him in prayer.
4. The ascension is an assurance of what we anticipate. He had told his apostles in the gospel of John that he was going to prepare a place for them, for his desire was that where he is there his disciples should be. The words of introduction of the solemnity of ascension in the Missal are: “We celebrate today Christ’s ascension to his eternal glory in heaven and express our Christian hope that where he, our Head, has gone before us, we, his Body, will one day follow, to live for ever in the Kingdom of our Father.” The words of the Opening Prayer further indicate this hope: “Father in heaven, our minds were prepared for the coming of your kingdom when you took Christ beyond our sight so that we might seek him in his glory. May we follow where he has led and find our hope in his glory...”

...HE WILL COME AGAIN IN GLORY TO JUDGE
THE LIVING AND THE DEAD, AND HIS
KINGDOM WILL HAVE NO END

The Benedictine monastery of sant’Anselmo in Rome used to be (and perhaps still is) a place frequently visited by guests, some staying a few days, some a little longer. I was privileged to be one of the guests staying “a little longer,” when I was accepted to do my final year of liturgical studies while residing at the

monastery. On one occasion during one of the community meals, I chanced to sit next to one of the “passing guests”; a young man, perhaps an aspirant to the Benedictine order, who was wearing a T-shirt with the words in big letters:”

I’ll be back!

Below these words was written in much smaller print that resembled a scribbled signature: “Jesus Christ.” I was intrigued with this inscription on the T-shirt. It sounded both as a threat as well as a promise, depending on who read it. And indeed that is what this article of our profession of faith might sound, depending on the quality of our life as well as our attitude to Christ.

“He will come again in glory, to judge the living and the dead.” When first he came, it was to show mercy to the world, to invite us to share his everlasting life just as he lowered himself to share our own. When he left to go back where he had come from, it was with a promise to prepare room for those who had accepted to take what he was offering. When he returns it will be to reward all those who will have hoped in him.

It is impossible for us in our present state to imagine the day of his Second Coming. We cannot picture our world as we know it, containing on one occasion all the people that have ever lived, together with all those who will live after us up to the end of time, whenever that will be. That must be a great crowd indeed. We cannot imagine this great crowd meeting the universal judge at the same time, getting to know him in a very personal way, and standing totally known to him in a way no other human being, even the most intimate friend, knows us. From a purely physical point of view, that would seem impossible, if we consider the shape of the earth. Even the sun that we see from

any part of the earth is never visible to all at the same time, since the world is spherical. Much less can we imagine what it is like to feel and know for certain that all life's troubles are over, all pain and toil, and that what lies ahead is everlasting fulfillment, love, peace, joy, harmony, bliss, delight; eternal discovery of the One who constitutes the object of our deepest longings.

What about those who will have rejected him out of their own free choice? The time of mercy will be over! That sounds terrible, so terrible that many believers do not seem capable of reconciling it with God's merciful love. There is a trend in theology that denies the possibility of eternal damnation, arguing that God's infinite goodness cannot possibly condemn anyone to eternal punishment. Many who espouse this view do not do so openly. Rather, they are careful never to preach on the matter. Whatever the scriptural readings or the circumstances may be, their message remains on the pleasant and soothing side. The good news of salvation, however, is truth; and truth is sometimes bitter. To avoid any mention of the possibility of eternal damnation would be to ignore another aspect of God; the fact that God is also just. It would also be to deny what is so plainly revealed in scripture. What other way is there of understanding chapter 25 of Mathew's gospel, apart from that it points to the possibility of eternal happiness as well as eternal damnation? In particular, I have in mind Matthew 25:41 which states: "*Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels...'*" This is not an isolated verse on eternal damnation.

The Catechism is unequivocal on this point. In its summary or "Compendium" it is stated:

Christ will judge with the power he has gained as the Redeemer of the world who came to bring salvation to all. The secrets of hearts will be brought to light as well as the

conduct of each one toward God and toward his neighbour. Everyone, according to how he has lived, will either be filled with life or damned for eternity...¹⁷

Although eternal damnation is a real and frightful possibility, it does not have to happen to anyone. As long as we are still alive in this earthly state, we have the possibility of rejecting eternal death and choosing eternal life. And to do this we do not have to rely on our feeble efforts, but on the many aids God has placed in our way to counteract our frailty. It is a most consoling thought to recall, that God sent his Son Jesus not to judge the world, but to save it, and to give the life he has in himself. No one who believes in him will be condemned.¹⁸ God does not wish that anyone should be lost, but that all may be saved.

I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT...¹⁹

Towards the end of our Lord's earthly Mission he prepared his apostles for his departure and consequent sending of the Holy Spirit. Over and over again he told them that when he would be gone from them he would send them, the Holy Spirit the Helper. This one would remind them of all that Jesus had taught them.

We even get a feeling that Jesus was eager to go so that he could send this greatest gift from above. He knew what a wonderful Gift the Holy Spirit would be to the apostles, and the Church. But we also sense a kind of reluctance on the part of the apostles, to look forward with enthusiasm towards the coming of this unfamiliar gift. Jesus they had known and touched and

¹⁷ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Compendium*, nos. 135.

¹⁸ John 3:17. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 679.

¹⁹ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Compendium*, nos. 136-146.

loved. Him they had come to love perhaps more than any other human being, for he was and he is love irresistible. The idea of losing him obfuscated any other excitement. It was as if the apostles wanted to say: "We are quite content that you do not go away; any other gift you can keep to yourself. You are all that we will ever desire."

To think like that of Jesus, who is God incarnate is not to err, for God is the highest good. But God has much more to offer than just his divinity veiled in the limited and limiting human nature. He has given himself to us in his Son; he gives himself to us also in the Holy Spirit. After Pentecost, when the apostles had to come to know this wonderful gift from above, they must have wondered how they could ever live again without the Spirit. People who have genuinely come to know the living power of the Holy Spirit in their lives also have discovered that the Spirit of God is the greatest gift of God to us; a gift whom we cannot live without.

Before looking at the individual phrases of the article of our belief in the Holy Spirit, one thing we must keep constantly in mind is that the way to knowing and experiencing God is not just by study, however systematic and meticulous, for God hides "these things" from the clever and the learned, and reveals them to mere children. God's Spirit, "in whom we live and move and have our being" is given to us free for the asking. All we need to do is to dispose ourselves properly, in order that our hearts become worthy receptacles for the Spirit to indwell.

...I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT...

I believe that God's Spirit is the all-pervasive power by which God directs creation. I stop for a while to marvel at this truth. How great that Spirit must be, to have in mind all history; to contain in consciousness in the most detailed fashion imaginable

every event that has ever happened, every event that is happening now, and all that will ever happen; to know what is taking place in the entire universe whose expansiveness baffles human imagination; to know every thought of every human being that has ever lived, is living and will ever live; to program all creation in such a way that it directs itself unerringly to the destiny intended by God, to plan the constitution of everyone of the tiniest particles that constitute nature; to do all this and much more without ever tiring, or getting mixed up, or losing interest... the thought makes someone as breathless as trying to read the last sentence all in one go!

I believe that God's Spirit is the power that makes every good action effective; the power that inspires every virtuous act. I believe that the Holy Spirit is the efficacy behind the tangible and otherwise meaningless signs that constitute the Church's liturgy. I believe that it is the Holy Spirit that makes the pouring of water accompanying the pronouncing of a short formula to assume everlasting import in the life of the baptized. I believe that every confirmed Catholic has the potential to carry out the mission of Christ according to the measure the Spirit has apportioned out to him or her, if this person has the courage and the generosity to respond positively. I believe that a sinner though I am, when I stretch out my words over the bread and the wine at Mass, they are transformed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. I believe that in spite of the fact that I myself stand in constant need of God's forgiveness, people are forgiven when I pronounce forgiveness over them, because Jesus once blew his Spirit on the apostles, and through them, on their successors and through these on me, for the forgiveness of sins in the name of the Triune God. I believe that the Spirit gives out different gifts to different members in the Church according as He sees fit: making some apostles, others prophets, some healers, others

teachers, some scientists others founders, some botanists, others farmers, some celibates, others parents, some poets others readers, some subjects, others leaders; all for a good purpose.

Finally, I believe that The Holy Spirit is here as I write and I hope and pray that the Spirit inspires what I write. I believe that the same Spirit is here as you read, and inspires you to draw meaning from what you read.

...THE LORD, THE GIVER OF LIFE...

In the Old Testament the title Lord refers to God. The Jahwistic accounts refer to God always with that title: the “Lord God”. We have only to read the second creation account to sense this. In the Creed the Holy Spirit is referred to with this title, a reminder that he is not just the spirit of God in the same way as we talk of my spirit or my soul. He is Lord and God in his own right, a distinct Person of the one God in three.

The Spirit is the giver of life. When God sends forth his Spirit, fresh life begins and the earth is renewed (cf. Psalm 104:30). The Spirit of God is the water of life that gives brings wholesomeness wherever it flows (Ezekiel 47; Revelation 22: 2) and that God gives freely to whoever is thirsty (Revelation 21:6).

The Spirit does not only give us physical life, but more especially he gives us life that corresponds to his nature, namely: spiritual life. Already in this earthly existence people living by the Spirit have unmistakable qualities that manifest that life. St. Paul described eloquently the characteristics of this spiritual life: *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law.”* (Galatians 5:22-23) However, this is only a foretaste of the life in fullness which the Spirit is yet to give to those who have accepted the life he gives.

WHO PROCEEDS FROM THE FATHER AND THE SON...

Here we touch a deep theological concept, namely: “the Divine Processions.” I am not sure I ever understood them very well during my study of Systematic Theology in the seminary. Nor am I sure I understand them well now. Therefore, I propose to cover them as hastily as – like my people say – a louse going across a bald head, from one tuft of hair to another. It fears that tickle of its footsteps might cause an itch on the scalp, thereby prompting the owner of the head to wipe or scratch the bald patch, to the louse’s doom.

In ordinary speech, one of the uses of the word “to proceed” is to “go forth.” Not far from my home, the River Nile *proceeds* from Lake Victoria on its three-months’ journey or so, covering over 4000 miles towards the Mediterranean Sea. The water that flows in it will have once been part of Lake Victoria. But river Nile cannot be said to be Lake Victoria. The two are distinct. Further downstream, in Southern Sudan, the “White Nile” is joined by another arm, the “Blue Nile” which proceeds from Lake Turkana in Ethiopia. The river now draws from both lakes, *proceeding* as it does, from both sources.

Similarly, a word can be said to proceed from a person’s mouth. That word expresses a thought of the one who utters it. To come back to scripture, the risen Lord blew on his disciples and told them “receive the Holy Spirit.” He thus helped them to understand with their limited human minds, that the Holy Spirit *proceeded* from him.

Obviously, every human illustration used to describe the divine must be defective. A word or thought cannot be said to be equal to the person who utters it. Nor does it assume a personality of its own. The procession of water from a lake into a river implies

a succession in time. There is a time when this water had not yet flown out of the lake; whereas time – like everything else made by God – does not exist in God.

The Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, such that we can talk of the Spirit being the Father's Spirit and at the same time being the Son's Spirit. But this is not to deny that the Spirit is God and a distinct Person. Nor does that imply that we have three Gods. One God, three Persons; no further questions!

...WITH THE FATHER AND THE SON, HE IS
ADORED AND GLORIFIED...

In my liturgy practice lessons preparing those about to become deacons, I used to insist that they learn to pronounce the words of blessing in full as they are given in the liturgical books, and not to make shortcuts as many priests do. They were to say: "May almighty God bless you, *the* Father, *and the* Son *and the* Holy Spirit," not "the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit" nor "...Father, Son and the Holy Spirit." The Church has decided that every article and preposition is important in as far as these bring out the fact that the three Persons are adored and glorified together.

The Holy Spirit is adored and glorified together with the Father and the Son because the three are one and inseparable. It is amazing how often in a homily (or a summary of some kind) I catch myself trying very hard to find a third point when I have already got two; or to condense four points into three, as if instinctively feeling that there is a point too many. And this I also see in the writings and speeches of other. Is it because we are made in the image of God who is triune that we think this way, I wonder!

...HE HAS SPOKEN THROUGH THE
PROPHETS...

It is amazing how much human beings can achieve when they set out to train animals, particularly the more intelligent ones. Take the dog, for instance. People have taught it not only to hunt, to guard homes and to eat at regular times, but also to track criminals, to collect mail from the mail box and to guide blind people through busy streets. All this is achieved even though dogs cannot speak or read. Even much less intelligent animals have been taught to do marvelous things. One has only to go to a circus to see what human beings can do to surmount the barriers of communication between them and other living species.

The barrier of communication between a human being and an animal can be compared to the barrier between the Holy Spirit and us human beings, if we consider the Spirit's sublimity and transcendence, and our limitedness as creatures with a nature weakened by sin. Yet the Spirit who guides all creation has also an infinite number of ways of guiding us towards our destiny. He knows of what we are made, he remembers that we are dust (Psalm 103:14). He knows how quickly we forget, how changeable our moods are. He knows how creatures endowed with reason can so often fail to use that reason for their advantage. He is aware of how we are in constant danger of losing our destiny to our eternal regret. He sees the broader picture while we can only see a few meters ahead. He wants us to get involved in this broader picture of God's plan of salvation for us.

He has spoken to human beings in various ways: through natural wisdom, through great thinkers and philosophers, through scientists that are capable of unraveling the laws of nature, through mystics, through scholars in every kind of field, and

through saints who have lived as all of us were meant to live; a life that shows us the beauty of God's creation, the dignity of mankind and the majesty of God.

One prominent way by which the Spirit has spoken to us in the course of salvation history is through the prophets. Often prophets were men and women of an upright moral life, and this cleared their vision to see the workings of God in history more lucidly than their contemporaries did. Prophets could reflect on negative social conduct and see where it would lead to unless checked. They could appreciate the value of righteous living, no matter what it cost. Their uprightness enhanced their prophetic gifts.

However, it was never by their personal merits alone that they became prophets. Rather, it was by a definite choice of the Holy Spirit. Authentic prophets had a clear sense of calling and mission. They could point at an event or a series of events in their lives that brought them to the awareness of being God's messengers. Quite often they were aware of having been unwilling, even resistant towards God's calling. Moses who had escaped from Pharaoh's court, and who knew too well how Egypt punished treason and how unwilling she was to release the Hebrew slaves was most unwilling to be the man chosen to rescue those slaves. The same reluctance was experienced by Jeremiah and by Jonah for different reasons. Prophets were often commissioned to convey a message that was unwelcome to the hearers, and this meant great suffering and rejection for them; another sign that the message was not their own fabrication. Some were so enthused with a sense of urgency in conveying the message they carried, that they were totally oblivious of their own security. All the time they were aware that this message was not from them, but from above. So often we

read in the prophecies the expression: "...it is the Lord who speaks."

The Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets, and this was always a great privilege as well as responsibility on the part of the person chosen. And yet the prophetic message was always intended for the wider community. It was always a message of God's love for his people and his guidance of them towards their destiny, even when at times it seemed to bring the very opposite. The doom that many prophets pronounced was the inevitable consequence of people's disobedience to God's command, but beyond that doom was always a ray of hope if the people changed their ways.

Besides the genuine prophets with an authentic message inspired by the Holy Spirit, there were always the false ones who were not sent by God. It is gratifying to be thought of as important, as carrying the message of an important personage. It is elevating to be thought of as a man or woman of God, as virtuous. Some discovered that being considered a prophet was materially rewarding. Often false prophets preached what people wanted to hear, and for this they were rewarded. Some of the false prophets did not actually know they were false; they were deceived into thinking they had a message from God by the Evil One who mimics whatever is divine.

For the people who to whom the prophecies were addressed there was always a double responsibility. First of all they had to be certain that the prophetic message was really from God, and not from some misleading source. Secondly, once this was certain, they did well to follow what the prophecy commanded for their own good.

God's Spirit has never ceased to speak to us through prophecy, although after God has definitively spoken through his Son, we

do not expect any further new revelations of God's plan of salvation. The guidance of the Holy Spirit is always necessary for us to understand the truth that has been revealed. We need that guidance to overcome our inertia. We need it to read and interpret correctly the signs of the times. For this reason the Spirit speaks to us even today through prophetic messages. However, as in the past, these messages constantly get mixed with false prophecies, for the same reasons as before. Moreover, we need to always remember, that even in the absence of false prophets, we need the light of the Holy Spirit to understand and interpret correctly what is divinely revealed. We have only to remember how frequently our Lord battled with those who prided themselves to be children of Abraham, and heirs of the inheritance promised through the prophets. In spite of that they totally misunderstood the one who was the fulfillment of those prophecies. His own villagers took up stones to kill him when he said that the scriptures had been fulfilled in him in their hearing. Even the well-intentioned disciples on the way to Emmaus were downcast because they had failed to understand the true meaning of the scriptures.

To conclude, we can say that the article that states that the Holy Spirit has spoken through the Scriptures reminds us:

1. To value the scriptures as an inspired message from God for our salvation.
2. To constantly pray for the light of the Holy Spirit that we may understand the true meaning of the scriptures, as well as discern all the prophetic messages that come to us today in the concrete circumstances of our daily life. We pray to have the Spirit's light to enable us to discern what is true from what is false.

3. To strive to follow what has been revealed to us for our own salvation.

I BELIEVE IN THE ONE HOLY CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH...²⁰

Within this article there are four affirmations. The Church is 1) one, 2) holy, 3) Catholic, and 4) apostolic. We need to examine these affirmations, one at a time.

...THE CHURCH IS ONE

Who are the members of this one Church? Are they all those who have been baptized in the Catholic Church? Are they those who receive sacraments? Are people belonging to other Christian denominations part of the one Church of Christ or not? What about those of other religions who for no fault of theirs have never heard about Christ, or have only heard distorted information about Christianity by Christ's enemies?

Generally anyone who fervently believes in any Christian denomination – or any other religion for that matter – considers this religion to be the true one, or at least the closest to the truth. But all Christian Churches and all religions cannot be all correct in this belief, if we agree that the truth is one. Who has the fullest truth? How do we know that we are not victims of self-deception? How does God see us from his point of view? We can never have absolute truths in this life, but we move along supported by our faith. Jesus whom we believe to be the fullest revelation of the truth has given us his own view of the matter.

²⁰ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Compendium*, nos. 147-217.

He constantly warned his disciples not to go by appearance, for quite often the truth is not the way things appear. The first can be last and the last first.

One day John and his comrades tried to stop a man from casting out devils in Jesus' name because he was not one of their number. John then later reported the matter to Jesus who answered: "you must not stop him: anyone who is not against you is for you." (Luke 9: 49-50). In the discourse about the Good Shepherd, Jesus told his disciples that "...there are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and these I have to lead as well." (John 10: 16) However, he also told his disciples on another occasion that: "He who is not with me is against me; and he who does not gather with me scatters," implying that in following him there must not be any compromise (Luke 11:23). So, who are the true members of the one Church of Christ?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains the Church's oneness:

The Church is one because she has as her source and exemplar the unity of the Trinity of Persons in one God. As her Founder and Head, Jesus Christ re-established the unity of all people in one body. As her soul, the Holy Spirit unites all the faithful in communion with Christ...²¹

As a Catholic I believe I belong to the one truth Church of Christ, introduced into it through baptism, fed the sacrament of his body and blood, cleansed by his forgiveness administered by his priests on his authority, given the example and intercession of his holy mother and other saints. However, I also know that this does not automatically make me a member of Christ's sheepfold that he leads to salvation. I must also be one of those sheep that know his voice and the he knows; that he calls by

²¹ *Compendium*, no. 161 Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 813-822.

name and that follow him. To refuse to listen to that voice is to choose not to be him, and therefore to be against him. It is not just external structures that constitute us members of Christ's one Church, important though these are; it is *this, as well as* hearing his word and putting them into practice. All humanity can find ultimate happiness only in God. There are many ways of moving towards God, some longer others shorter. The shortest and most direct way has been revealed by God's Son. I believe to have struck this way. But that gives me the responsibility to respect others in their own ways, but also to help them to discover this most direct way. I must also constantly recall that even the one on the shortest root can lose his way, while those taking a longer root can arrive safely in spite of the difficulties to overcome.

...THE CHURCH IS HOLY

During and after the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 many people wondered how a people so predominantly Catholic could do such things to each other: how people believing in Jesus Christ whose core message is love and forgiveness could harbor so much hatred and hardheartedness. What happened in Rwanda in fact has happened in so many other areas in so many different forms down through history. Christians have hated, maimed, enslaved, cheated, exploited and committed all sorts of atrocities, sometimes even in the name of their faith. To become aware of the unfortunate reality of sin most of us do not have to look very far; we only need to look within ourselves. Are we members of the Church which we profess to be holy in the Creed? Yes, we are.

In the introduction to the Rite of Penance there is described of the Church as both holy and in need of cleansing. The apparent contradiction is explained thus:

Christ 'loved the Church and gave himself up for her to make her holy' (Ephesians 5:25-26), and he united the Church to himself as his bride. He filled her with his divine gifts, because she is his body and fullness, and through her he spreads truth and grace to all. The members of the Church, however, are exposed to temptation and unfortunately often fall into sin. As a result, 'while Christ, "holy, innocent, and unstained"(Hebrews 7:26), did not know sin (2 Corinthians 5:21) but came only to atone for the sins of the people (see Hebrews 2:17), the Church which includes within itself sinners and is at the same time holy always in need of purification, constantly pursues repentance and renewal.'²²

Yes, the Church is holy because 1) it is united to Christ who is holy, 2) each member is sanctified from original and personal sin in baptism, 3) all have the means of sanctification placed at their disposal, 4) all are ultimately destined to holiness, 5) it already has a multitude of fruits, the saints, and 6) we too, no matter the state of our souls can and must strive to attain what the saints have already attained.

Because the Church is holy it is also a sacrament, an instrument, a source of sanctification. "United with Christ, the Church is sanctified by him; through him and with him she becomes sanctifying. All the activities of the church are directed, as towards their end, to the sanctification of men in Christ and the glorification of God..."²³

²² *The Roman Ritual: Rite of Penance*, Translated by the International Committee on English in the Liturgy, 1976. no. 3.

²³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 824.

...THE CHURCH IS CATHOLIC

“Catholic” is a word that originally comes from Greek “katholikos” or “καθολικός” It means “universal,” in the sense of “according to the totality” or “in keeping with the whole.”

In common usage “Catholic” refers to that bigger part of Christ’s followers consisting of over a billion people, under the leadership of the Roman Pontiff, or the Pope. When canon 808 of the Code of Canon Law states: “No university, even if it is in fact catholic, may bear the title ‘catholic university’ except by the consent of the competent ecclesiastical authority” it presupposes that the term “catholic” is used in the sense just described. (In fact the term “Catholic” is not defined in the code. It is assumed to be known.) In the same way, the title *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that has been used as basic reference in the reflections on the Creed is understood to be specific to the Roman Catholic Church. Similarly, when in my passport under “Profession” is indicated “Catholic Priest,” it is expected that officers at customs understand that I am a priest within the Christian faith led by the Holy Father. Under this usage people talk of Catholics and non-Catholics to designate those who belong to the Roman Catholic faith under the leadership of the Pope, and those who do not.

However, we need to point out two things. First that there are many Christian denominations which apply the term to themselves with a different meaning. Secondly, that Catholics do not define themselves solely by their belonging to a Church guided on earth by the Pope. In fact, the self-definition of the Catholic Church is much broader than many Catholics and other Christians think, as we are going to see.

There are many Christian denominations that are known by different designations but that apply to themselves the term “catholic” in the sense of universality, that is, in the sense that all

believers in Christ belong to one Church of Christ irrespective of their peculiar ways of understanding and defining their faith. In fact most Reformation and post-Reformation Churches use the term in that sense. That is why they too recite the Nicene Creed in which the article “I believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church” is found. They also use other creeds that mention the term such as the Apostolic Creed (“holy catholic church”) and the Athanasian Creed (“the catholic faith.”) In order to remove the ambiguity of use of the term therefore, some denominations, for example the Anglicans, refer to the Catholic Church as the “Roman Catholic Church.” This is a term that the Catholic Church itself finds acceptable, if only for ecumenical reasons. It is also to be noted that there are Christian denominations that refer to themselves as “Catholic” but not “Roman Catholic.” These include the Liberal Catholic Church, the Old Catholics, the Polish National Catholic Church, the Independent Catholics, and the Ancient Catholics.

What we profess when we say “I believe in the...Catholic... Church” has been defined extensively in nine articles of the Catechism. Here below we limit ourselves to looking at two of them, in which is described those who belong to the Catholic Church.

“All men are called to this catholic unity of the People of God... And to it, in different ways, belong or are ordered: the Catholic faithful, others who believe in Christ, and finally all mankind, called by God’s grace to salvation.

“Fully incorporated into the society of the Church are those who, possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept all the means of salvation given to the Church together with her entire organization, and who – by the bonds constituted by the profession of faith, the sacraments, ecclesiastical government, and communion – are joined in the visible structure of the

Church of Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops. ²⁴

The Church was meant to be universal, all-embracing, catholic. Jesus prayed to his Father for the unity of his followers; that they may all be one, as he and the Father are one (John 17:21-23). Even if for the moment the reality is quite different, all Christians ought to desire, to pray and work for unity; otherwise they do not share the same vision and ardent desire of their Master. The way that the Catholic Church and many other denominations look at the term “Catholic” indicates that they are open, at least in principle, to ecumenical dialogue.

...THE CHURCH IS APOSTOLIC

The word “Apostle” comes from the Greek *Ἀπόστολος*, (apostolos) meaning emissary or the one who is sent.

“The whole Church is apostolic, in that she remains, through the successors of St. Peter and the other apostles, in communion of faith and life with her origin: and in that she is ‘sent out’ into the whole world.”²⁵ Prior to the transmission of the message of salvation is its absorption in union with the Church. And then all its members, in different degrees, share in its mission. They carry out the mission in so many varied ways, but all these ways can be summed up under three aspects. 1) By living according to Christ’s commands, especially the command to love; 2) by communicating the message of salvation to others through word of mouth, and 3) by intercession to God for others.

The apostolate of the Church must be exercised in union with Christ who sends us, if it is to bear its fruit. We need to

²⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 836, 837.

²⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 863.

constantly remember his words that without him we can do nothing (Cf. John 15:1-8). This is how Christ wanted things to be. “He called to him those whom he desired;... And he appointed twelve, whom also he named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach.”²⁶

Authentic apostolate must also be exercised in union with the Church. The words of St. Paul to the Church of Ephesus also apply to us: “*you are part of a building that has the apostles and prophets for its foundations, and Christ Jesus himself for its main cornerstone*” (Ephesians 2:20).

Obviously, the mission to go out to the whole world and proclaim the message of salvation to all creation was not meant to end with the apostles who would eventually die. Accordingly, they appointed successors to continue with their work. These are the bishops together with the priests and deacons as their helpers, and in union with the successor of Peter, the first among the apostles.²⁷

There is a beauty to be seen in the unity of this apostolic Church. It is clear that the variety of gifts among its members, the assortment of temperaments, the multiplicity of cultures, the wide range of interests, and the diversity of circumstances would lead to fragmentation as it does among many other Christian denominations, if there were no centralized authority. But in the Catholic Church all these find legitimate expression in different congregations of contemplative and secular charisms, various associations of Christ’s faithful, numerous popular devotions, all under the See of St. Peter.

²⁶ Mark 3:13-14. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 858.

²⁷ Cf. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November 1964, no. 20.

I ACKNOWLEDGE ONE BAPTISM FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

Baptism frees us from original sin, and from all personal sins committed before its reception, and constitutes us children of God and of the Church.

A good summary of what the Church believes and professes in the doctrine of baptism and its relation to original sin is to be found in the *Profession of Faith of Paul IV (1968)*.²⁸ On the nineteenth centenary of the martyrdom of the apostles Peter and Paul (June 30, 1968), which marked the end of the “year of faith” (1967-1968) promulgated by him one year earlier, Pope Paul VI closed the liturgical celebration with a “solemn profession of faith.” Preoccupied by “the disquiet which at the present time agitates certain quarters with regard to the faith” the Pope considered it his duty to “fulfill the mandate entrusted by Christ to Peter”, whose successor he is, “to confirm his brothers in the faith.” Below is an article from this Profession of Faith, regarding Original Sin and Baptism.

We believe that in Adam all have sinned, which means that the original offence committed by him caused the human race, common to all, to fall to a state in which it bears the consequences of that offence. This is no longer the state in which the human nature was at the beginning in our first parents, constituted as they were in holiness and justice, and in which the human being was immune from evil and death. And so, it is human nature so fallen, deprived of the gift of grace with which it had first been adorned, injured in its own natural powers and subjected to the dominion of death, that is communicated to all human persons; it is in this sense that all

²⁸ Jaques Dupuis and J. Neuner eds. *The Christian Faith*, New York, Alba House, 1996, p. 27.

are born in sin. We therefore hold, with the Council of Trent, that original sin is transmitted with human nature “by propagation, not by imitation” and that it “is in all human beings, proper to each”...

We believe that our Lord Jesus Christ by the sacrifice of the Cross redeemed us from original sin and all the personal sins committed by each one of us, so that the word of the apostle is verified: “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more (Romans 5:20).

“We believe in and confess one baptism instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism should be administered even to little children “who of themselves cannot have yet committed any sin”, in order that, though born deprived of supernatural grace, they may be reborn “of water and the Holy Spirit” to the divine life in Christ Jesus....

Why does the Creed insist on *one* baptism? We know that Baptism is one of those sacraments received only once, and that Christians baptized in other denominations and wishing to join the Catholic faith are not rebaptized, unless it is established that the baptism they received was not valid. Where an earlier baptism cannot be established after all possible inquiry, a person may be baptized conditionally, with the formula “N, if you were never baptized, I baptize you in the name of...” One can see that even in this case, baptism is not ministered twice but once. The question is why?

When Peter objected that Jesus would never wash his feet, his master told him that unless he washed him Peter could have nothing in common with him. And when Peter then asked to have his whole body washed, Jesus replied that “*No one who has taken a bath needs washing, he is clean all over. You too are clean, though not all of you are.*” (John 13: 2-11). The same applies to Baptism; no one who has taken a bath once needs washing anymore by

Baptism. Yet it is possible to have received baptism and not to be fully clean, as was the case with Judas. In that case something else is necessary for the re-cleansing, not baptism, that is repentance and reception of the sacrament of Reconciliation.

Baptism (together with Confirmation and Orders) imprints an indelible character on the recipient, for that reason it is not repeated (canon 845, par. 1).

I LOOK FOR THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD, AND THE LIFE OF THE WORLD TO COME.

We believe that at our death the body is separated from the spirit. Without the life-giving spirit the body dies, and immediately the process of disintegration sets in leading to decay and “turning back to dust.” The spirit meets its Creator for the “Particular Judgment.”²⁹

We cannot say categorically how the process of judgment takes place. One reads accounts of people who have been clinically dead, and who somehow came back to life. But these are not official Church teaching. It is reported that after the separation of the soul from the body the person is able to see all that he or she did in life, all the good they did and the good consequences of their good deeds on others. They are able to evaluate all the events of earthly life in the light of eternal truth. In that light one can see the things that on earth are considered important but in fact are not, as well as those that are given little importance but in actual fact are of paramount import, namely love. They are also able to see all the harm they caused by their sins of omission

²⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1021-1022.

and commission, and the ripple-reactions these sins caused. In the light of God's goodness, the soul, unencumbered by the body, is now able to see its sins and their consequences, and this knowledge results into a painful experience. The Church neither affirms nor denies these accounts.

No one can speak from experience of life after death, as long as we are in this earthly life, because it belongs to another dimension or state of being. Even people who by some divine intervention have had an experiential glimpse of these realities cannot adequately communicate them to us who have not, for the simple reason that we have not. "How the resurrection of the body will come about exceeds the possibilities of our imagination and understanding."³⁰ Yet we believe, on the credibility of the one who has revealed these realities. When the followers of Christ walked away one after another in protest because he had said he would give them his flesh to eat, Jesus turned and asked his apostles whether they too wanted to go away. Peter answered for the others, not because he had understood the mystery of the Eucharist at the time, but because he believed in the credibility of Jesus. He said: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life..." (John 6:68). We too say the same with regard to eschatological realities.

Revealed truth teaches us that there are three possible consequences after the particular judgment: 1) those who have totally rejected God's love and forgiveness realize to their eternal sorrow that they have chosen eternal damnation.³¹ 2) Those who were not so good as to merit to come immediately in the presence of God, and who at the same time hoped in his mercy and love go in a state of purification or purgatory. The

³⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Compendium*, no. 205.

³¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1033-1036.

Catechism defines Purgatory as “the state of those who die in God’s friendship, assured of their eternal salvation, but who still have need of purification to enter into the happiness of heaven.”³² Of this state the Catechism further teaches: “Because of the communion of saints, the faithful who are still pilgrims on earth are able to help the souls in purgatory by offering prayers in suffrage for them, especially the Eucharistic sacrifice. They also help them by almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance.”³³ 3) The third category consists of the saintly people who get admitted in God’s presence immediately just as Stephen at his martyrdom.³⁴

The article we are considering, however, is not about what happens after our individual deaths, but what will happen at the end of time when the Lord returns a second time in glory as he promised he would. Then all the bodies long turned to dust will be reunited with their souls to a life that will have no end. The resurrected body will be the same body as the one before in the sense that this will not be another person. It would destroy the very idea of resurrection, if the dead were to rise in bodies not their own. At the same time the risen body will no longer be subject to the laws of nature as we know them; of needing physical food or shelter or means of transport or rest. It will not be subject to old age or to disintegration. It will be immortal.

After the resurrection of bodies and the final judgment, there will be two instead of three states: the redeemed who will live with God and his angels in eternal happiness for ever, and the damned who will live in the company of the devil in eternal regret and sorrow.

³² *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Compendium*, no. 210.

³³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Compendium*, no. 211.

³⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1023-1029.

According to the Catechism, “Hell consists in the eternal damnation of those who die in mortal sin through their own free choice. The principal suffering of hell is eternal separation from God in whom alone we can have the life and happiness for which we were created and for which we long.”³⁵ Of the damned the book of Revelation says: the wicked “shall seek death, and shall not find it, shall desire to die, and death shall fly from them” (Revelation 9:6). Even to contemplate the state of damnation makes one shudder.

To the question “How can one reconcile the existence of hell with the infinite goodness of God?” the Catechism answers: “God, while desiring “all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9), nevertheless has created the human person to be free and responsible; and he respects our decisions. Therefore, it is the human person who freely excludes himself from communion with God if at the moment of death he persists in mortal sin and refuses the merciful love of God.”³⁶

As for the bodies of the saints, we gather from the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*³⁷ that they shall be distinguished by four transcendent endowments, or qualities. The first is *impassibility* which shall place them beyond the reach of pain and inconvenience. (Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:42). The second is *brightness* or *glory*: They shall shine like the sun. They will be endowed with different degrees of glory.³⁸ The third quality is that of *agility*, by which the body shall be freed from its slowness of motion, and endowed with the capability of moving with the utmost facility

³⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Compendium*, no. 212.

³⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Compendium*, no. 213.

³⁷ Article by A.J. Maas. Transcribed by Donald J. Boon. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol XII. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 2007. www.newadvent.org/cathen/12792a.htm

³⁸ Cf. 1 Corinthians 14:43, Matthew 13:43 Philippians 3:21.

and quickness wherever the soul pleases. The fourth quality is *subtlety* by which the body becomes subject to the absolute dominion of the soul. The body participates in the soul's more perfect and spiritual life to such an extent that it becomes itself like a spirit. Of this body it can no longer be said that "the spirit is willing but the body is weak."

The best exemplar of the resurrected body, at least of the redeemed is that of the Lord himself after his resurrection. It is possible, even likely, that Jesus veiled the full glory of his resurrected body in order to be seen by those still in this life. Still, there are definite characteristics of the risen body that were manifested in his appearances. 1) He moved at will, unencumbered by natural laws of locomotion. He did not need the door to be opened in order to enter a locked and barricaded room, for instance. 2) He could be at different places at the same time, or at least at incredible speed. 3) He could change appearance more easily than people change clothes. Now he even chooses to appear in the form of bread and wine.

The most reasonable thing to do is not to speculate who will be saved and who will not, but to try to go through the narrow door, by using all the means God has put at our disposal, as well as striving to lead as many others as possible to salvation. No matter the condition of our souls, no matter what we have done in the past, it is possible to access God's mercy, as long as we are still living. All depends on what we choose to do, with the help of God, from this present moment onwards. The example of sinners turned saints: of Mary Magdalene who was privileged to be the first among the disciples to see the risen Lord, of St. Paul, of St. Augustine and of many others is testimony of what God's goodness can do in leading us to the destiny he intended for us.

...AMEN

Just as the last word in the Bible is “Amen” which is consent to all that God has communicated, so also we concluded the Creed with the same consent, as a kind of re-affirmation of all that we have professed.

THE LORD’S PRAYER

INTRODUCTION

In pious homes, when the table is set and the family sits down to eat, the first thing that they do is to say the grace before meals. The Lord’s Prayer is a form of Grace before the Eucharistic meal. In this prayer the Lord Jesus taught his disciples to ask from the Father for their daily bread. We ask for that, as well as for our spiritual food which we are about to partake of; Christ the Bread of Life.

To reduce the Our Father to a petition of food, both spiritual and material, is to impoverish it, for in fact the prayer “contains seven petitions made to God the Father. The first three, more God-centered, draw us toward him for his glory; it is characteristic of love to think first of the beloved. These petitions suggest in particular what we ought to ask of him: the sanctification of his Name, the coming of his Kingdom, and the fulfillments of his will. The last four petitions, present to the Father of mercies our wretchedness and our expectations. They ask him to feed us, to forgive us, to sustain us in temptations,

and to free us from the Evil One.”³⁹ The best thing to do is to savor the prayer phrase by phrase in order to become more conscious of its depth.

OUR FATHER

The very first phrase, “Our Father” is a prayer in itself. We acknowledge that God is a Father to us, we are his children. He did not only create us, but he also redeemed us through his Son. Becoming children of God is a privilege, an invitation to share his life and his everlasting happiness. But it is also a responsibility to live by the rules of his household. There is an interesting argument between Jesus and the unbelieving Jews in John 8:31ff. The Jews claim to be sons of Abraham and sons of God, while Jesus maintains that their actions negate what they claim to be. The fact is that Jesus and the Jews argue from two different perspectives. The Jews are right when we consider the matter from their point of view. They were created by God and are descendants of Abraham by blood; Abraham who was the father of God’s holy nation. But Jesus teaches them – and us – that the status of being children of God involves much more than having been created by him. You have to do what he does and commands, and to love what he loves. Otherwise the Devil himself could rightly call God his Father, for God brought him into being! When we recite the Our Father we are challenged to strive to be God’s children, by living in a manner that corresponds to that status.

When we say “Our Father” and not “My Father” we also acknowledge that we are brothers and sisters, children of the same Father. That too is a privilege as well as a responsibility. We have the responsibility of acting like loving brothers and

³⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Compendium*, no. 587.

sisters to each other. Unless we make the effort to live worthily as children of the Father and brothers and sisters to each other in love, the Eucharist will not be of spiritual nourishment to us.

WHO ART IN HEAVEN

We acknowledge that our Father is in heaven. That is his home. And if he is our Father, that is our home too. That may sound like nothing more than pious talk. Heaven sounds too far. None of us has ever been there. Some wonder whether it is there at all, and not just a figment of the mind. Earth seems more real, more concrete. However, none of us, not even the most hardened atheist, can escape the fact that this world is not our home. We are reminded of that truth the older we grow. We see people we have known and loved die off one by one, some after a long illness, some quite unexpectedly. We know deep down that one day it will be our turn. We fall sick now and then, we take medication and recover. But we know that one day there will be a sickness from which we shall not recover. It is then consoling to know that there is a Father for us in heaven, and that his home is our home. Even if we would live here on earth a hundred years or more, that would be absolutely nothing in comparison to the duration in our lasting home: not just a few hundred years, not thousands, not millions, not billions, but forever. There it makes no sense even to talk of time and duration; we talk of an everlasting now. This short stay on earth with all its trials and tribulation is meant to be a preparation for that lasting home. And the Eucharist we are about to eat is the food for the lasting home. For "...this is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that a man may eat it and not die. I am the living bread which has come down from heaven, anyone who eats this bread will live for ever..." (John 6:50-51).

HALLOWED BE THY NAME

We pray that his name be held holy. What does it mean that God's name be held holy?⁴⁰ The second commandment of the Decalogue teaches us not to take the name of God in vain.⁴¹ The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains: "Respect for his name is an expression of the respect owed to the mystery of God himself and to the whole sacred reality it evokes. The sense of the sacred is part of the virtue of religion."⁴² The Catechism explains further the full meaning of the Second Commandment as well as Jesus' fulfillment of that commandment: "You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not swear falsely'...but I say to you, do not swear at all." If the name of God is to be respected and revered, as respect to God himself, so much more are we bound to respect the Sacrament of his presence which we are about to receive.

THY KINGDOM COME, THY WILL BE DONE ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

The prayer for the coming of God's kingdom has a double sense. We pray for the coming of his kingdom at the end of time, and we pray for the coming of that kingdom among us now.

The Church prays for the final coming of the Kingdom of God through Christ's return in glory. The Church prays also that the Kingdom of God increase from now on through people's sanctification in the Spirit and

⁴⁰ See also the discourse on the holy name "...Jesus..." on page 13.

⁴¹ Exodus 21:7; Deuteronomy 4:11

⁴² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2144

through their commitment to the service of justice and peace in keeping with the Beatitudes...⁴³

God's kingdom over all the redeemed and the conquest of all evil will come, whether we pray or not. When that time comes there will be no more pain and sorrow, no more toil, no more hatred; no more evil of any kind. Instead there will be happiness, victory, love, and the certitude that this bliss is to last forever. When we pray that God's definitive reign in the Parousia comes, we are not trying to hasten the end of the world. A small very saintly minority of humanity might pray just for that. But the majority of us are not in such a haste to enter eternity. If God were to engage us in a dialogue at the recitation of this petition, and ask us when exactly we want him to bring this kingdom, few are likely to say "today evening" or "tomorrow by midday" or even "next year." The majority would prefer to enjoy this life a little longer, knowing that it comes once and that it is very short. Rather, our desire and prayer in this petition, is that we too may be counted as part of God's kingdom, no matter when it will definitely come. However, in order to be members of that kingdom at the end of time it is necessary that we belong to it now.

We *are* members of that kingdom now, by virtue of our baptism. Through his Son God has made us his children and heirs to his kingdom. However, he expects us through our free choices to remain members of that family and to contribute to its growth by doing our God-assigned duty. We remain members of God's kingdom and we contribute to its growth in the present moment, when we submit the free will he gave us out of love to his all-wise and all powerful will. We belong to his kingdom if we do what he commands and avoid what he forbids. The next phrase

⁴³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Compendium*, no. 590.

of the Our Father explains what it means for God's kingdom to come us in the present state; it means that his will is done among us as it is in heaven. God is already King of heaven where his will is followed perfectly. When we do his will on earth as it is in heaven then his kingdom comes among us. This will is not one of tyranny but of love. "The will of the Father is that all men may be saved..." (1 Timothy 2:4).

In our present state the choice to do God's will in favour of our own will costs. It means denial of self, of the things which in our misguided and short sight appear to us to be the better choice but in fact are not. At the same time even in this life already, doing the will of God pays off. We experience the fruits that characterize God's kingdom, namely "...righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."⁴⁴ Because it is not always easy for us to do what we know to be right, we need assistance both to discern correctly what the will of God is, and to have the strength to do it. It is through prayer that we can discern the will of God (Romans 12:2) and have the steadfastness to do it (Hebrews 10:36).⁴⁵

GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD

God rained down "relief aid" in the form of manna, to his people caught up in an emergency situation during the Exodus. However, on the same day the Israelites tasted the produce of the Promised Land the manna stopped from falling (Joshua 5: 12). In the same way, during times of emergency and natural catastrophes relief workers supply those caught in the disaster with food and other basic needs. Relief organizations know that when times of emergency passes the best thing is to assist people

⁴⁴ Cf. Romans 14:17.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Compendium*, no. 591.

gain self-sustenance, not continue giving them relief aid. By doing this they in a way imitate God whose normal way of sustaining us is by availing us, not with relief packages, but with all that is necessary for us if we exercise well his gifts of intelligence, of our limbs and of nature. When we ask for our daily bread we do not ask God to spare us from the drudgery of work, but for the wisdom to apply ourselves to extract what is already given, for our needs and for the needs of the less fortunate.

There are so many people in the world who do not know where their next meal will come from, who do not remember when they last had a decent meal, who live constantly with hunger, and who grow sick and sometimes even die because of hunger. There are many others whose problem is how to eat less food, who struggle to lose weight for aesthetical or medical reasons, who grow sick and sometimes even die because of excess food. Sadly quite often the two categories live close to each other, like the rich man and Lazarus. I have lived in both camps and I know what I am talking about. Even when they don't, the rich can always extend their help to the poor if they want to. The petition for our daily bread is a reminder to the "haves" of the needs of the "have-nots;" it is a prayer of the "have-nots" for the softening of the hearts of the "haves."

In this petition we do not only ask for material food which we eat and grow hungry again, but above all for spiritual food which endures unto eternal life (John 6:27). We ask for the gift of the Eucharist. Here too, we ask for something that is already given. The Our Father is recited after the consecration, and Jesus has already offered himself at the altar as our spiritual food. Our petition therefore is that we may dispose ourselves appropriately – with faith, reverence and contrition – in order to allow this spiritual food to nourish us.

AND FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES, AS WE
FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US

Over and over again the Lord taught us the need to forgive sins. We need to realize how much we ourselves, have been forgiven. We are about to share in his blood shed for us so that *sins may be forgiven*. Like the unforgiving servant of the parable, we stand in much greater debt to God than anyone person could ever offend us. The sharing in the Eucharist then is a challenge that we strive to forgive those who have offended us.

Forgiveness is not at all easy when a person has deeply been hurt. It is more difficult when a person has been hurt over and over again. It is even more difficult if the offender is not sorry for the hurt inflicted, and if the offender continues to perpetrate the injury. But the one who forgave his executioners even as they carried out the act of crucifying him is the one who asks us to forgive. When forgiveness proves too difficult at least we can offer him our good will to forgive. At least we can ask him to help us to forgive. “Now even if it seems impossible for us to satisfy this requirement [of forgiveness,] the heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit can, like Christ, love even to love’s extreme; it can turn injury into compassion and transform hurt into intercession.”⁴⁶ When we consume the Eucharist with this prayer, even when we have not succeeded in forgiving totally, the Lord himself helps us gradually to forgive and to heal from the hurt.

⁴⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Compendium* no. 595.

AND LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION

The apostle James told us that God never leads us into temptation.⁴⁷ How are we then to understand this petition in the prayer of our Lord? Quite often one part of scripture explains another. In this case Paul gives us the explanation. “The trials that you have had to bear are no more than people normally have. You can trust God not to let you be tried beyond your strength, and with any trial he will give you a way out of it and the strength to bear it” (1Corinthians 10:13). Paul shows us here, that God does allow trials and temptations to come our way, but then with every trial he gives us sufficient means to overcome. If we do fail sometimes, we cannot blame God for the failure, and this is the point of James. We can only blame ourselves for not having used the way of exit God provided for us. And if we look carefully at the circumstances of our failure we can always see that we could have escaped if we wanted.

But why does God allow temptations at all in the first place, we may ask? This question was answered adequately by Origen. He said:

God does not want to impose the good, but wants free beings... There is a certain usefulness to temptation. No one but God knows what our soul has received from him, not even we ourselves. But temptation reveals it in order to teach us to know ourselves, and in this way we discover our evil

⁴⁷ “Never, when you have been tempted, say, ‘God sent the temptation’; God cannot be tempted to do anything wrong, and he does not tempt anybody. Everyone who is tempted is attracted and seduced by his own wrong desire. Then the desire conceives and gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it too has a child, and the child is death.” (James 1:13-15).

inclinations and are obliged to give thanks for the goods that temptation has revealed to us.⁴⁸

If then temptations are permitted by God for our own good, what is the point of asking in the Our Father that God does not lead us into temptation? In that petition we ask God

...not to allow us to take the way that leads to sin. We are engaged in the battle 'between flesh and spirit'; this petition implores discernment and strength. The Holy Spirit makes us discern between trials, which are necessary for the growth of the inner man, and temptations, which leads to sin and death. We must also discern between being tempted and consenting to temptation. Finally, discernment unmasks the lie of temptation, whose object appears to be good, a 'delight to the eyes' and desirable, when in reality its fruit is death.⁴⁹

The battle against temptation is won through prayer. It is by his prayer that Jesus vanquished the tempter, both at the outset of his public mission and in the ultimate struggle of his agony.⁵⁰ We pray before the Eucharist for this strength against temptations, we pray with faith that the body and blood of the Lord we are about to take are themselves defenses against failure during temptations, and we also strive to augment this divine assistance by resorting to prayer in the actual moment of temptation.

BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL.

This petition is closely linked with the previous one. If one were to put the two of them together and to paraphrase them one might render them thus: "In the danger of falling help us not to

⁴⁸ Origen, *De orat.* 29: PG11, 244CD. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2847.

⁴⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2847.

⁵⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2849.

fall, and if we *have* fallen help us to rise up again.” Remorse, discouragement and despair can be very useful instruments of the enemy in dragging us further from God. But however far we have gone from God, however deep we have sunk in sin, we must never forget that Christ alone who died for all sin can rescue us. The further we are from God and from grace the more need we have of him. God alone can deliver us from evil. In this petition, evil is not an abstraction, but refers to a person, Satan, the Evil One, the angel who opposes God. “A murderer from the beginning... a liar and the father of lies,” Satan is “the deceiver of the whole world.”⁵¹ With his lies he can try to persuade us that there is no hope for us, that God is so angry with us that he cannot take us back anymore, that after all, we have committed so many sins, what difference would another sin make, and so on. We pray in this petition that we may rise from our misery like the prodigal son, and resolutely return to the Father, with the assurance from Christ, that the Father will forget all our past and make great feasting over having us back.

⁵¹ John 8:44; Revelation 12:9.

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