

CREED AND COMMUNITY



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The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, Born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into Hell; the third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From there he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy Christian church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen

INTRODUCTION

Christian Creeds have been used to both define and defend the historically revealed and received faith. Defining identity and defending against heresy were two crucial responsibilities of the early Church. The Church and the world needed to know the boundaries of proper belief and behavior.

The need for definition and defense continues to be of utmost importance. As long as there are competing religious systems, counterfeits, heresies and cults, there will always be a need to define and defend the faith. Truth exists, and it must be perpetually defined and defended. Karl Barth, likely the most important theologian in at least 500 years, has written that to say "yes" to truth is to also say "no" to every other theological competitor. Ascription to Christian truth will of necessity force us to deny every competing philosophy and theology that is contrary to God's written revelation and to the affirmation of the universal Church. We must not forget this.

Beyond definition and defense, however, the Creeds offer a very clear picture of community and relationships. The Church is *the* community which the creeds define and defend. The classic Christian creeds seek to set the boundaries of community based upon the Triune nature of God as the Three-In-One. If we actually embrace what we recite in the Apostles' Creed, we will enjoy a distinctly Trinitarian community. Creed is critical to community.

In this series of reflections I have chosen the Apostles' Creed as the center-point of my meditations on creed and community. There are at least two reasons why I have chosen this particular creed; one is personal and the other is practical. Personally, the Apostles' Creed is the creed most familiar to me. I say it every day when I participate in the appointed Daily Offices of prayer. From a practical standpoint, however, the Apostles' Creed is a baptismal creed, and, as we all know, baptism is our first church-sanctioned introduction into the Christian community. Consequently, it is important that we appreciate the Apostles' Creed in at least some of its community implications and applications.

In this series of meditations on the Apostles' Creed, attention is given to some of the broad applications that this particular creed has upon building Christian community. In no way are these thoughts intended to be exhaustive, but, rather, they are intended as introductory ideas that may warrant further attention. God wants us to be one, a unity amid diversity. It is my hope that these reflections will contribute to the fulfillment of God's intention.

I BELIEVE IN GOD

To believe in God is to believe in community because God, the "Holy and Undivided Trinity," *is* community. God is the proto-community from whom we gain instruction, insight, and inspiration. As the "Three-in-One," God eternally exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is fundamental Christian doctrine. It is also functional and formational Christian doctrine.

God eternally existing as a community is fundamental and functional Christian doctrine, but it is also a mystery. While there are numerous examples throughout Holy Scripture regarding the unity of and equality between members of the Godhead, and although sacred tradition, councils, and creeds support this belief, the word "Trinity" is not used in the Bible and the concept remains somewhat obscure.

Many people have tried to explain this mystery. St. Patrick is purported to have used a shamrock to explain this sublime truth. Others have used other examples. Regardless, however, there are at least two things that must be said about this truth as it applies to our present consideration: (1) It is, and will forever remain, a mystery, (2) God has revealed some things about Himself about which we can make measured comments. Although the concept of the Trinity will forever remain a mystery, God has revealed some of His nature to us. What God has revealed about Himself as a Triune Being has a great deal to tell us about living in and as community.

Among many other natural and chosen attributes, The Triune God of the Bible is the God of Love who demonstrates a profound unity and diversity. God is love both by nature and by choice (cf. *1 St. John* 4: 8 and *1 Corinthians* 13: 4 - 8). He is Love, and He consistently functions *in* love. From eternity unknown God existed as Triune Divinity, as Love and in love. As far as we are told, God, during those unknowable eons, existed as Love and expressed this love only among the Godhead alone. Within the Godhead founded upon and existing within Love, there was unity of being and of choice. Similarly, as the Godhead exists as "three persons," there was also diversity. Although God is "One," He is also the "*Three-In-One*."

Charity (love), unity and diversity have a great deal to tell us about community. As a Christian community we are called to live in love just as the Triune God lives in love --- as both unity and diversity. St. John's first epistle makes this abundantly clear. As "born again" by the Holy Spirit, the Church is born of, from and to love. If we are truly children of God, we will (in some ways) share His nature, character and calling.

We live in a fallen world, and we must perpetually wage war against the flesh and the devil. That is, love will always be internally and externally challenged. Love, in our

current context, will always be assaulted. Love is always a hard choice.

If community is going to function as a community (particularly as a Christian community where there is a diversity of persons, personalities, knowledge, growth, opinions and perspectives) we must always be prepared to sacrifice and forgive.

Forgiveness is an expression of God's love. It central to God's nature and to Christian community. From "before the foundation of the world" God had prepared for sin. The Triune God, the God who is Love, existed in a unity not just of "persons," but of passion, purpose, power and practice in order to achieve what was lost through human sin and subsequent separation. Forgiveness was part of God's plan from before the beginning. God's passion for humanity purposed Him to put into practice the costly forgiveness that would, once again, unite us together with the Godhead and with humanity as a whole. It was purposed before creation, promised immediately after The Fall, practiced as early as when God clothed Adam and Eve in the Garden, promoted through the ongoing need for animal sacrifice in Old Testament worship, and exemplified and fulfilled in Christ's death upon the cross. As followers of Christ, we are called to fill up what is lacking in Christ's suffering (*Colossians* 1: 24). Forgiveness builds bridges and unites.

Those of us who celebrate God in more liturgical forms of worship will be quite familiar with creedal formulas. We will appreciate that the individually chosen "I" of belief is also the corporately chosen "We" of belief. The bridge between "I" and "we," between "me" and "you," between "us" and "them" must begin and ultimately end with an appreciation of the God, the Three-in-One, who so capably demonstrated forgiveness and calls us to do the same. To believe in God is to believe in community; recognizing that there is a price to be paid in order to attain and sustain it.

I BELIEVE IN [...] GOD THE FATHER

The fundamental truth of God as Father is very difficult for some people to understand or appreciate. In some cases, abuse and/or neglect have brought about this difficulty. For other people the concept of God as Father appears to be sexist. Others think that human language is so severely limited in its efforts to describe the God that almost any description is unlikely. To them, God will always be a mystery. Whatever may be our hesitations about referring to God as "Father," there is at least one reason why we should use this term: The Bible consistently makes reference to God as Father. At least one other reason also exists: the concept and reality of God as Father is important to Christian community.

If God is the Father of the Church, the members of the Church (regardless of our denominational affiliations) are to be seen and treated as brothers, sisters, fathers and

mothers. That is, if God is Father, Christians are family.

Unfortunately, as with the concept of God as Father, "family" is also a hard concept for some people to embrace. Many people come from very unfortunate family backgrounds. As a result, the idea of family is severely lacking if not negatively tainted. For many people, "family" expresses something very negative and destructive. Family, as God intend it, is not what many people have experienced. The family that God created us to enjoy is safe, communally oriented, properly self-affirming, supportive, encouraging and, at times, a place where we can receive honest feedback. This, and not an interpretation rooted within our negative experiences, is what God intends. God is a loving Father (who at times is described as having feminine attributes), and the Church is a motherly "womb" of life and a fellowship of diverse persons and cultures who love God (appropriate worship) and neighbor (loving service). If God is Father, we are called to be a family in the biblical sense of that the word seeks to communicate.

If we affirm God as Father and the Church as family, what are the social (i.e., communal) implications of such an orientation? The answer to this question will in some ways be found by examining the relationship that our Lord himself had with his "Heavenly Father" --- and toward the disciples to whom he entrusted his kingdom.

Jesus was quite clear regarding his relationship with God the Father. He repeatedly referred to God as "Abba," a word which some suggest means "daddy." It implied a unique, loving relationship between Father and Son. However, Jesus was also quite clear about his relationship to the Father as a servant. He emphatically stated that he came into this world to do God's will, not his own. God was not simply Father, but *Almighty*. This implies obedience. Obedience is due God as the *Father* who is also *Almighty*. This emphasis upon obedience was exhibited throughout our Lord's earthly life, but especially during his wilderness temptations, suffering in Gethsemane and death upon Golgotha. Doing God's will was a costly enterprise.

This balanced concept of Father Almighty, of intimacy and authority, is important to the maintenance of Church unity. If God is Abba and Almighty, and if those who share in God's adoption are family, attitudes and actions that break fellowship are often (but not always) unwarranted. However, and unfortunately, we may also need to face the cold and hard fact that there are times when church fellowship and affiliation may need to be broken. When essential Christian beliefs and behaviors are compromised, serious consideration must be given to leaving the church and/or the denomination. However, there are many people who leave churches over relatively minor matters. Minor issues are not worth dividing over.

We need to understand that true intimacy and authority place proper constraints upon us. We cannot do what we wish when we want. We belong to God and to His Body, the

Church. Intimacy and authority require submission and sacrifice, a submission and sacrifice that Jesus amply demonstrated.

During the short years that Jesus was with his disciples, he demonstrated absolute and unalterable commitment to God. The disciples clearly understood that our Lord came to do the Father's will. They observed Christ's submission to God and the service he offered them. They saw and they knew the cost.

This was not easy for the disciples. In fact, they were themselves tempted to leave Christ, his service, and the intimacy of fellowship with the other disciples. But, hopefully like us, they had to confess that there was nowhere else to go because Christ was (and is) the word of life. Their love and commitment outweighed their fear and uncertainty. They knew intimacy and authority, God through Christ as Abba Almighty, and this drastically altered how they saw themselves, functioned as a community, and lived before the world to which they were sent to preach the gospel. Such an orientation to God as Abba Almighty can also transform us.

I BELIEVE IN GOD [...] MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

The natural and chosen inclination of love is expression and expansion. Love desires to create. It cannot abide alone. If love does not want to express itself, and to expand beyond the limited borders of "me and mine" and "we and ours," there may be some doubt about whether the love we feel is a love that is real.

God is love. This love was enjoyed by the Triune God for untold eons before human beings were created. But, as an extension of the eternal fellowship that the Godhead enjoyed, human beings were created in God's image and likeness. We were created in, from, to and for love. We were created in, from, to and for community.

When the Godhead chose to create, the Three-In-One did so in an ordered manner. Upon doing so, creation was proclaimed to be "good," and "very good." If we are going to be co-creators with God, if we are going to see His kingdom come "on earth as it is in heaven," if Christian community is going to be attained and maintained, we will need to ensure that our efforts are both "good" and "very good." And we must never forget that the gospel, the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ, is a gospel "to the whole world" and for "every creature" (*St. Matthew* 28: 18 - 20).

The proclamation of the good news, the gospel, created a new community. We read of this in the four Gospels and in the *Acts of the Apostles*. In the four Gospels we repeatedly find our Lord calling people to community. This challenge began with the calling of the twelve Apostles, but his calling extended well beyond an elite few. Three items particularly highlight Christ's community-building orientation: (1) His call for all to

"repent," "believe" and "be baptized," (2) His consistent emphasis upon the Great Commandment, (3) His refusal to restrict the proclamation of good news to an elite few. The disciples shared a similar vision after our Lord's resurrection (the potential of community), ascension (the promise of community) and the sending of the Holy Spirit (the power of community). Like their Lord, the disciples also proclaimed a gospel that created community. St. Paul, in his epistles, further establishes young communities by outlining this potential, promise and power which God in Christ by the Holy Spirit has bought and wrought for them --- and for us.

There is a dynamic parallel between creation and community. In both cases God's proclamation created cosmos from chaos. In both cases the "good" and "very good" of creation were drastically damaged by The Fall. In both cases God's redemptive purposes potentially (and practically) empower the restorative process. In both cases we must tend to the weeds of our gardens/communities through pain and the sweat of our brows. In both cases the redemption which Christ wrought is the cornerstone of renewal. In both cases there is always the threat of weeds (sin) overrunning the boundaries and threatening the order of creation and community.

As co-creators with the God who is the "creator of heaven and earth," the Church has a unique responsibility to proclaim Christ who is the center-point of community. In keeping with our Lord's Great Commission, we must be diligent to proclaim the gospel of Christ. Put in the terms of the creation narrative, we must speak creative words that create cosmos from chaos. This requires a great deal of brooding, of praying over the disorder of culture and community. We must pray and work toward achieving community. We must labor to bring about change, to return us to the "good" and "very good" of God's communal intention. We must perpetually be attentive to the "weeds" that threaten community, working by the sweat of our brows.

This is no small responsibility. We live in a fallen world, and there will always be "weeds" that threaten community. We must be vigilant and vigorous. We must understand that there must be *borders and boundaries* of communities, just as there are barriers and boundaries in a garden. Finally, although alluded to throughout this final paragraph, we must attend to the very practical aspects of community building. It is hard work, but required if we are going to create and sustain community.

I BELIEVE [...] IN JESUS CHRIST [GOD'S] ONLY SON

The three classic creeds of the Christian faith were often --- if not entirely --- written in times of crisis. They were intended to address particular problems that confronted the Christian community at that time. They not only defined and defended the

faith; they also defined and defended the fellowship. A careful evaluation of these problems will demonstrate that, in many ways, these problems continue to plague us.

One such problem revolves around the person of Jesus Christ. Who is he? The answer, for those of us who actually believe the Bible, is quite simple: Jesus Christ was and is God in the flesh. We believe this in spite of the questionable "quest for the historic Jesus" at the beginning of the 20th Century, and the outright nonsense of "The Jesus Seminar" at the end of the 20th Century.

The question, "Who is Jesus Christ," is important. The proper answer is even more important because our answer indicates our relationship to God, to each other and to the world at large. Our answer(s) about Christ will also in some way (for good or for ill) influence the community.

The formulators of the Apostles' Creed, basing their assessments upon Holy Scripture, suggested that Jesus Christ was the *only* Son of God. The writers of the Nicene Creed, also basing their pronouncements upon Holy Scripture, took this a step further by insisting (and properly so) that Jesus Christ was in every way equal to the Father.

What bearing does Christ, specifically Christ as God, have upon Christian community? Every community has a center, a core, around which everything else revolves. Without such a center, there is no order. Take, as a simple example, our moon. If there was no earth, would the moon circulate around in the same place and way? The earth gives the moon its orbit. Similarly, families that function well have a parent or parents around which the children properly constellate. The same might be said regarding society and culture. Where would we be if the President was not constellated around the core of the Oath of Office? Where would we be if the courts did not need to constellate themselves around our Constitution and Amendments?

What happens when there is no center, no core? Our current social condition clearly provides an answer: Without our center we become more fragmented and isolated. Moreover, without a common vision we are at odds with each other and seeds of violence and murder are sown. We wonder why there is such a drastic increase of violence in our society, and, to be honest, there are many answers. But one answer is that we have lost both our center and our vision. "Without vision, the people perish."

Christ as God is our center-point, and as our center-point must include at least two ingredients: Proper belief and proper behavior. To embrace only one of these is to try and fly with only one wing. Proper doctrine without exhibiting appropriate behavior is hypocrisy. Exhibiting proper behaviors without embracing the appropriate doctrines is heresy. Both, alone, extremely limit relationships and community. We must have proper belief and proper behavior to "fly right."

This has everything to do with the credal statement that Jesus is "*our Lord*." He is

not just *my* Lord. Although I am an individual, and am responsible for my own actions, I do not live alone. My choices impact other human beings. Christ Jesus is the Lord of the entire Church. We are *all*, without exception, under the authority of God. As Christians, we are not free to think and choose as we would like. We are not free to pick and choose which parts of the Bible (or the Creed) seem to be agreeable to us. Commitment to Christ is not a Jeffersonian "clip-and-paste" relationship, deleting those demands that make us uncomfortable and embracing those expectations that may be far less exacting.

The Apostles' Creed was written at a time when the question of Christ's identity was being debated. Dangerous doctrines, and the practical aspects of a commensurate lifestyle based upon those ideas, were being introduced. The Church chose to address these issues. They, and we, needed to address these false doctrines that led to faulty living. When we claim and proclaim "Jesus Christ [God's] only Son our Lord," when we identify ourselves with the doctrines outlined in the creeds, we are committing ourselves to believing and abiding by what we are saying. To do anything less makes us hypocrites or heretics.

Moreover, to do otherwise puts us out-of-step with the historic community of the Church. Relationships are mangled by maverick "Christian" theologies. Saints John, Peter and Paul all warned us against false doctrines and false prophets. The Bible tells us that, in many cases, they are almost indistinguishable from the genuine believer in Jesus Christ. They are *almost indistinguishable*. According to our Lord, we will "know them by their fruits."

Where do we stand regarding "*Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord*"? Where do we stand regarding the classic Christian creeds? To refuse to submit to what the Church has historically embraced is to break fellowship and compromise community.

***I BELIEVE [...] IN JESUS CHRIST [...] CONCEIVED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT, BORN OF
THE VIRGIN MARY***

Like both Christ and Holy Scripture, the Church was "birthed" through the intimate collaboration of Heaven and Earth, Divinity and Humanity. In God's eternal wisdom, and by necessity of our fallen condition, our Lord needed to be fully God and fully man. Through the Holy Spirit miraculously "coming upon" the Virgin Mary, this union was achieved. In a similar fashion, when God divinely ordained to have His oral word transcribed into written language, he arranged for a similar process of collaboration. The Holy Bible is a collection of writings in which God communicated through human beings what He wanted to say. As such, as Karl Barth has pointed out somewhere, it is a text fully Divine and fully human, bearing the imprint of both.

The Church of Jesus Christ is also born of both God and of humanity. God in Christ breathed upon the disciples (*St. John 20:22*), and said "Receive the Holy Spirit". This was further emphasized and empowered through the experience of Pentecost in the *Acts of the Apostles*. We find in both texts, most especially in the *Acts of the Apostles*, the birth of the Church. It is divine in that it was God who breathed His life into it. It is human in that it required the receptivity and obedience of the disciples. Our Lord told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they received the promise from on high. Their obedient availability, paralleling the Mary's "be it unto me according to thy word," made room for the Church to be "birthed" within and among them. The implication of this text, paralleling the creation narrative when God breathed life into Adam & Eve, must not be minimized. Our Lord is here, in this text, heralding a new community.

The Church can be seen to be both human and divine in at least one other way: It continues to survive and grow in spite of the ongoing persecution we have sustained, and in spite of the multitude of mistakes that have been made. I believe it was the late Dr. Paul E. Little who drew attention to this in one of his books. We do not have a perfect past although we have a perfect God --- a God who calls each of us to holy living --- whom we worship.

Notwithstanding some of our major failures, there are many instances throughout our history that highlight how God is with and in his people. The Holy Scriptures are one example. What a history the Bible has! It was written over a period of about 1500 years by a multitude of people and yet it maintains an amazing cohesion and consistency of message. It has survived being outlawed, suppressed, burned, and (in the west) almost lost with other great writings of antiquity. Moreover, it has influenced some of the greatest pieces of music, art and literature in the world. It continues to have tremendous and positive influence. Untold multitudes of people have been encouraged and strengthened by what God in His written word (through human hands) has had to communicate. The written Word of God, coupled with the Spirit of God, has changed lives.

God can also be seen to be with His people as we examine the history of what the Bible communicates. Think for a moment about the men and women and children God chose to do his work. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were no gems, but they became the patriarchs of both Jews and Christians. Moses had his disobediences, and yet led the people of God to the Promised Land. David, in spite of his notable failures, established Israel as a nation to be reckoned with. Take a few minutes to read through Hebrews 11. Here are some of the heroes of faith who accomplished great things for God in spite of, at times, having notable weaknesses.

Other examples exist, but the point is this: the God-in-Man phenomenon, "the life of God in the soul of man" (Henry Scougal), the cooperation of humanity and Divinity, has wrought miraculous things. Here are examples of the Church --- organism and organization --- under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit doing great things for God in spite of the many obstacles which were faced. Christ was in these men and women as "the hope of glory," as God's "strength perfected in weakness."

T. S. Eliot said that he was able to show us "fear in a handful of dust." Such is humanity. We are dust: Shaped by God, breathed within and upon, empowered and sent out to do His will. We do His will in and through His power. We do this in all of our terrible (yet redeemed) humanity.

All of this has everything to do with living in community. We are in no way perfect, but, for whatever reason, we are chosen by God to be a community. Among us there are the good and the bad, the "tares and the wheat," the "sheep and the goats," the academic and the emotive, the gifted and the not-so-gifted, the spiritual and the carnal. We are a mixture. Sometimes we are a holy mixture. We are holy when we submit ourselves to God under the appropriate guidelines as found in Holy Scripture --- and to each other mutually. This is where the union of heaven and earth, God and humanity, shines. This is the "stuff" of which strong communities are built. On the other hand, we can at times be an unholy mixture when we are not submitted to God, not submitted to Holy Scripture, not mutually submitted to our neighbor from love, and do not embrace God's power and purposes. When such submissions are not in place, community is compromised.

Our Lord was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He was fully God and fully man, clearly *not* an unholy mixture. He was submitted to God entirely. From this place of obedience, our Lord spoke a new community into existence. In the same way, we must be entirely submitted to God in order to effectively serve. It is only from a position of loving obedience that a community will endure (*Revelation 2: 1 - 7; 3: 7 - 13*). Will we, like the Blessed Mother, say "be it unto [us] according to Thy word"? Are we willing to pay the price of speaking such words?

***I BELIEVE [...] JESUS CHRIST [who] SUFFERED [...] WAS CRUCIFIED,
DIED, AND WAS BURIED***

It was assumed that the crucifixion and death of Christ was also the death of the Church. There was every reason to believe this. When Christ was taken by betrayal in Gethsemane, he was also abandoned by his followers and denied by one of his dearest

friends (St. Peter). The brutality of crucifixion was enough to silence any argument.

However, as we know, this was not the end of the story. Christ rose from the dead, and his resurrection was the seed of the new community that was empowered by the Holy Spirit. This community turned the world "right-side up".

But we must not move too quickly. Human beings like to move beyond the unpleasanties as swiftly as we can. Suffering and death are not readily embraced. Unfortunately, as demonstrated by our Lord, we must address difficult issues. Individuals and communities must each have their days of suffering, death and the grave.

This is a hard word to understand or embrace. Like our Lord we are called to redemptive suffering. *Colossians 1:24* is clear. In this text St. Paul refers to "filling up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ" on behalf of the Church. This appears to be a very odd statement, almost bordering on some very bad theology. Obviously, however, St. Paul is not a questionable theologian, and he has something to teach us.

Is St. Paul suggesting that our Lord did not complete his redemptive mission? Is he suggesting that Christ left some "loose ends?" In both cases the answer is a resounding "absolutely not!" Christ did everything necessary to secure our salvation. Nevertheless, in spite of our Lord's "once for all" sacrifice, there are times that members of the body must share in the suffering of other parts of Christ's body, the Church. If we do this well, like Christ, it is redemptive suffering.

How can this be? It has been said that we sometimes "need someone with skin on" to comfort and encourage us. Christ has ascended into heaven. He is authoritatively seated at the right hand of the Father, and the Holy Spirit has been sent into the Church. We are God's representatives on earth. We are Christ's ambassadors. We are, so to speak, Christ's body. We are those people "with skin on" who are called to be present, in and through Christ by the Holy Spirit, to the world and in the Church. In some ways, therefore, redemptive suffering is Christian living. We are in some ways challenged to live sacrificially on behalf of others.

As Christians who are called to fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ, we too will need to decide whether we will take on these responsibilities or not. We do have a choice, a choice that God has entrusted to us. We will need to make a decision about whether we will accompany our Lord to the cross, death, and the grave. Such actions build community.

***I BELIEVE [that] JESUS CHRIST [...] DESCENDED INTO HELL [and on] THE
THIRD DAY HE ROSE AGAIN FROM THE DEAD***

The Brothers Karamazov highlights a very insightful principle to which all of us might relate. Dostoyevsky writes that he would not mind suffering if it was only for a short time, on stage, and for all to see. In other words, if the lessons of suffering could be learned through brevity and an appropriate amount of attention and adulation it might not be all that bad. Suffering might not be all that bad if marked by both shortness of time and success of outcome.

Dostoyevsky was not so naive in his practical life, however. After all, he spent many years in prison for a crime in which he may not have directly participated. We should not be so naive either. Like Job, we have no idea how long we will suffer throughout our lives, or even if there will be a positive *earthly* outcome.

Our Lord's descent into hell, also known as "the place of the dead," may have been a similar experience of absolute uncertainty. The Bible tells us that it was the "joy" set before our Lord that empowered him to endure the cross and despise the shame. But, even while trusting in the Father, he cried out with the wrenching uncertainty of "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" It may have been a liturgical utterance, but it also reflected life-experience.

As stated in a previous section, we should be prepared to suffer (*1 Peter 2: 21 — 25*). When we suffer according to God's purposes there will always be a redemptive outcome. However, we are not always immediately aware of the salvific impact of our suffering. There are times when we experience deep pain, a hell that may appear to have absolutely no redemptive value.

Such suffering comes in many forms. One such hell with which we are all very familiar is the suffering imposed upon us by other human beings, by those whom we love, by the members of the Church. It is one thing to be injured by enemies of God. It is an entirely different experience to be betrayed by your family, the members of your Church. This is a very hard experience to understand, embrace and integrate. It really is, albeit metaphorically speaking, a descent into hell.

Our Lord knew such betrayal and suffering at the hands of His friends. Judas betrayed him with a kiss. Peter denied Christ three times. Almost every disciple abandoned him in his hour of need. He was mocked, ridiculed, maligned, falsely accused, abused and murdered. His death was as a criminal, and he experienced, during his last dying moments, that he was abandoned by God.

Did our Lord know that it would only be for three days? Did he think, "I can tough it out for three days, this won't be so bad." When Job began his ordeal he was quite uncertain about how long he would need to suffer. Some scholars estimate that Job only had to endure a few months of suffering. Others have suggested that his suffering

stretched out through the remainder of his life until he was quite old. We are not told. His suffering lasted an unspecified amount of time. Our experience is the same. We have no idea how long we will need to suffer at the hands of others. We have no idea how long our hell will last.

What did our Lord do during his ordeal, upon his descent into the hell? During his betrayal and abandonment, although discouraged by his disciples' inability to "keep watch," and deeply troubled by their abandonment of him during his time of deepest need, He nevertheless comported himself with dignity. He maligned none. He spoke badly of none. He was, as one of the prophets has written, silent before his accusers. Christ's purpose, regardless of how others treated him, was to achieve God's redemptive purposes. This, using an Old Testament illustration also embraced in the New Testament, required a sacrificial lamb. And, as we all know, specifically when we consider the lamb of Passover, the lamb was provided for the entire household, the entire community of believers.

When our Lord descended into hell, he was not idle. He preached the good news (*1 Peter 3: 19 -22*). When we are forced to descend into various hells of suffering, hells that are all-so-often created by the hands of "friends," what do we do? Are we, like our lord, proclaiming God's good news of redemption (cf. *St. Luke 23: 32 — 43 and 1 Peter 3: 19 — 22*)? Are we, like our Lord, proclaiming words of peace and reconciliation (*St. John 20: 19 — 23*)?

I am challenged by Christ's descent into hell. I want to know how much I will suffer, how long, and to what purpose. I am sometimes blinded by what the church *should be* and is *called to be*, when, in fact, we all-too-often fall short of God's ideal. I am angered by the betrayal of "friends," those who call themselves Christians but refuse to live by the loving boundaries of fellowship.

Christ experienced similar circumstances, but, due to the cosmic nature of our Lord's every decision, every circumstance was of far deeper consequence than our own. We will be forced to suffer. We will at times descend into hell. How will we respond? Will we build community, even within these tombs? Are we willing to descend into hell on behalf of others?

***I BELIEVE [...] JESUS CHRIST [...] ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN AND SITS ON
THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY***

The very good news about the gospel of Jesus Christ is that it will always prevail. The widely acclaimed writer of *The Lord of the Rings*, J. R. R. Tolkien, speaks about the slow and long (and I might add, agonizing) defeat which the good --- and those who

support the good must always endure. Life in a broken world is always a slow defeat. But, as with *The Lord of the Rings*, this slow and long defeat always ends with the triumph of good over evil. God and the Christian community prevail over every socio-pneumatic chaos.

The reason for this ultimate victory is that our Lord has physically ascended into heaven and abides at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. This is the place of authority (*Acts of the Apostles 7: 54 — 56*). This - the assurance that our victory is guaranteed by Christ through his death, resurrection and ascension - is a fixed and final hope. God will prevail because God is God. We will overcome because our Lord has determined that we will be overcomers.

The assurance of ultimate victory through life's many struggles is a great comfort. When we examine the Church there are ample causes for us to be discouraged. The Church, whether locally or universally, is not (at times) what it should be. We fail in so many ways. Moreover, apart from our own shortcomings, the Church throughout many parts of the world is under attack. In the United States these attacks may be less pronounced, but they still exist. In other parts of the world, Christians suffer and die in order to remain faithful to Christ and his cause. They do so, as well, to remain faithful to others within the Church.

When I reflect upon the embattled condition of Christ's Church, I am inclined to despair. We are torn by strife both inside and outside of the Church. It almost feels like we are being swamped by the many storms of life while Jesus is asleep in the back of the boat (*St. Mark 4: 35 — 41*) oblivious to our sinking situation.

But our Lord is definitely not unaware or unconcerned. He awaits a response from the "little-faiths" who happen to share the "boat" of the Church with him. In the story just referenced our Lord challenged the lack of faith of his disciples. Maybe we also need to have our profound lack of faith challenged.

The whole of our Lord's family is in this sinking ship we call Church. We are all in this together. As G. K. Chesterton was purported to say, "we are all in this ship together, and we are all seasick." There are storms that threaten to overwhelm us, but Jesus is in the ship with us. We are not alone.

The question, within our text and within life, is not about God's absence during these storms. Rather, the question delves into the darkest depths of what we will do. How will we be present, how will we "show up," when the boat of the Church seems to be sinking?

There is no doubt that our Lord Jesus Christ has ultimate authority over every part of life. Moreover, to address those pockets of resistance and to provide rewards, Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead. His promises, power and authority are

assured. However, between his ascension and his Parousia, we are challenged to make God-centered and Church-affirming decisions. How will our decisions impact the outward storms of life that threaten our physical existence? How will we respond to others who share this small ship of salvation with us? When life's many storms threaten to overwhelm the Church, what will we do to calm the storm? If we honestly believe that Christ is the ascended and authoritative Lord who will come again, we will have absolutely no choice but to respond with faith, hope and love. And, to be sure, it is these three that build community.

I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

Many books have been written about how the Holy Spirit is active in the Church, most specifically through the "gifts" that He offers. Prophecy, speaking in tongues, healing, as well as other gifts, are frequently profiled. For just over one hundred years there has been a great and important resurgence of interest in the "charismatic," and it is likely that books like these are part of that ongoing wave of interest.

I do not in any way wish to dispute or debate the value of such texts, nor their theological accuracy. However, it is important to mention that there are many other gifts, roles and abilities of the Holy Spirit beyond those that are commonly associated with the Charismatic Movement. While in some ways the Holy Spirit may have at times been a neglected member of the Godhead in the Church's theological thinking and practical living, we must at all costs avoid becoming overly attentive to only selective areas of the Holy Spirit and His ministry in and among us.

One of the most important ministries of the Holy Spirit is His ability to unify the people of God. As the song says, "We are one *in the Spirit*, We are one in the Lord" (emphasis mine). The Holy Spirit *does* unify us. Regardless of our background, culture, country, color or denominational preferences, if we are "born-again" by the Spirit of the Living God we are members of the universal body of Christ. We share one Father, one blood (Christ's), and one Spirit that imbues each of us with life. This is important for us to remember as we live as a community. As mentioned in the last segment, there are many things about which to be discouraged with the Church. There are a great many things that threaten to divide us. These range from seemingly small and inconsequential issues to issues that really are of great importance. It is so easy to become sidetracked and sidelined by the non-essentials. How can we avoid becoming sidetracked and sidelined? The answer is not always easy because there really are issues of difference among us, some of which are of a very serious nature.

If we are genuinely Christians we want unity. This is an indisputable fact. We want unity for at least three reasons. First, as a reflection of the Holy Trinity, the Three-in-One, we are created for unity amidst diversity. Second, as those who have the Holy Spirit within us, we are supernaturally one body in which *all members* are a part of the whole. Third, as those who hunger to obey God, the Bible commands us to unity.

Jesus calls us to be unified. He prayed that we might be one even as he and the Father are one. St. John, the Apostle of love, with his repeated emphasis upon caritas, indicates that this is the mark of every true believer. (The late Dr. Francis Schaeffer capably highlights this in his book, *The Mark of the Christian*.) St. Paul, particularly in his commentary upon the Eucharist, starkly emphasizes our need for reconciliation and, as such, unity. Furthermore, the Apostle Paul emphasizes unity by making mention of the Church's "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all, and in all and through all." Not in any way seeking to divide the Godhead, it seems to me that the Father is "over," "in," and "through" us through the Holy Spirit.

St. Paul's words above give us at least a small hint about how to achieve unity. We have "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all, and in all, and through all." We become unified by recognizing and embracing our essential nature. We are one in God because we have the Spirit of God. As such, God is our Father, Christ is our brother (as well as Lord), and every member of Christ's Church is a member of our family.

This is, of course, rather simplistic. But, simplistic or not, it is also a reality. The Holy Spirit has made us into one family. We are one by nature, if not by every choice. A good example of this is my own family. There are some members of my family who really have a hard time with me and my orientation. I share similar sentiments about some of their ideas. Do we disagree? Do we "fight"? Do we dialogue? Of course! Nevertheless, even with our differences, we are family. In spite of our differences, we set certain issues aside in order to attain and maintain the bond of unity. We share one blood and, to some large degree, one history.

The Church is by nature a unified body. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. Under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit we must not cease to labor to make this unity more visible and viable. If we truly do believe in the Holy Spirit we have good reason to believe in the unity to which He has appointed us. We truly are "one in the Spirit."

I BELIEVE [...] IN THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

For many people believing in the holy *Catholic* Church is quite difficult to embrace. When they hear the word "Catholic" a whole host of prejudices come to mind. Some of these prejudices are well-founded, rooted at least somewhat in history. In other cases it is just unfounded prejudice. As we consider what it means to believe in the holy Catholic Church, it is important that we understand what is meant by "Catholic."

We commonly think of "Catholic" as *Roman Catholic*. That is, we think of a set of churches who are in communion with the See of Rome and who recognize the Pope as the titular leader of that segment of Christianity. To some degree, this is a correct assessment. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest of Christian denominations, with viable claims to apostolic antiquity – albeit misinterpreted and applied. However, this is certainly not the only way of thinking about this term. I, as well as a great many other people throughout the world, am also Catholic. There are a great many other people embrace a "catholic" heritage while not subscribing to either Roman or English sentiments. "Catholic" is not a term that can be restricted to one particular denomination.

While the words "Roman Catholic" may not refer *exclusively* to a particular denomination, it can and does have a very particular *orientation*. Catholic means universal or Christian. The Vincentian Canon says it well: "that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all" is what makes one a Catholic. This is the definition I wish to adopt as we reflect upon this next statement in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the holy Catholic Church."

What has been believed "everywhere, always, and by all"? This is a difficult question, especially if one believes in the progressive development of doctrine. In *I Corinthians 15: 1—8* St. Paul clearly outlines the essentials of the gospel: Christ died for our sins, was buried and rose again from the dead for our justification, was seen by the Apostles and close to 500 other people after our Lord's resurrection, and ascended into heaven. All of this, according to St. Paul, is grounded in what the Holy Scriptures have declared. This seems to be both simple and accessible. Obviously, as a Christian who embraces the teachings of Holy Scriptures, I have no argument with what St. Paul teaches. Nevertheless, in some ways, this text is somewhat limited. It is, if nothing else, addressed to a group of Christians in a particular place at a particular time with very specific needs. I am not sure that St. Paul's statement is, therefore, exhaustive. Rather, it is a "bare-bones" outline.

Moreover, as the Church struggled with many internal and external threats and issues, further development was needed. Some of these issues were of utmost importance as the Church began to grow and develop. The Church had to wrestle with

the implications of Holy Scripture in the light of who Christ claimed to be, what he taught, and how this related to both Church and culture.

New answers were needed as new problems and questions were posed. Eventually the biblical canon was officially recognized, and the three classic Christian Creeds were adopted. Obviously, as mentioned throughout this text, these creeds had the defense and definition of the faith clearly in mind. The same might be said about the recognition and official adoption of the biblical canon. However, in spite of these things, the preservation of Christian community was of utmost importance to the early Church.

When we claim to believe in the holy Catholic Church, we verbalize our commitment to maintain Christian community. We want the church to be pure, holy, preserved. We want a community that is set apart from sin, for God, and for each other. We want a Church that, because it is holy, can act as both prophet and priest to a separated world. We do not in any way want to compromise our holy standing through biblical, theological, moral, or ethical impropriety. We want, as God intends, the Church to be preserved from all unholy contamination. We want a community that truly is a community ---- properly oriented to God, each other, and the world.

Moreover, if we are genuinely Catholic, we recognize all people who subscribe to the fundamentals of the faith (in word and deed) as brothers and sisters in Christ. If the essentials are embraced, we are all family regardless of our theological orientation. We are one because God is one: Because He is Father, because Christ is Brother, because the Holy Spirit is Comforter and Guide. However I must be very swift to add that there are some denominations which claim to be Christian, but clearly are not. Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormon's immediately come to mind. While we must be as ecumenical as Scripture will allow us, we must never forget that being holy and Catholic implies that those who do not meet these standards must be seen as enemies to the Church. They are subjects of evangelism, not fellowship.

To believe in the holy Catholic church is to believe that the Church, God's Church, is worth keeping as both holy and Christian. The holy Christian Church is worth defending, defining, and celebrating as a unique fellowship of saints.

I BELIEVE [,..] IN THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS [...] THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

Recently I had a friend tell me that he was not sure we could fellowship any longer because my view of the Bible was different than his. This seemed quite odd to me. We both saw the Bible as the authoritative word of God. We both understood the Bible as having and making a claim upon our lives. We both had what might be called a "high"

view of Holy Scripture. Where we disagreed was on the issue of "inerrancy." My friend just could not see why I refused to use the word when applied to God's written revelation. He could not see nor understand that, in my thinking, the word "inerrancy" was little more than a concession to Scientific Rationalism. As a result he was seriously thinking about breaking fellowship.

Believing in the holy Christian church means that we believe in the communion of saints. God entirely supports every appropriate ecumenical effort. He calls us to be one. He calls us to be sanctified, and, as such, unified. Small issues are not worthy of division.

Real communion is not easy to achieve. We are, *in fact*, one body. However *being* one body and *living* as one body are often two entirely separate realities.

This should not be. This is not God's intention. Contrary to what many people might think, unity does not mean unanimity. Apart from Christian essentials there is plenty of room for diversities of opinion. I believe it was Luke Timothy Johnson who said that when the Church adopted four gospels it recognized the need for diversity. It also, in doing so, understood that there could and would be diversities of honest opinion – within limits. The writers of the four gospels did not see the life of Christ in entirely the same way. St. Peter and St. Paul at times disagreed on some issues, St. Peter sustaining a rebuke from St. Paul regarding at least one area of contention. We are different, we see things differently and, as such, we are going to see, know and experience God differently. There are "many foxes that destroy the vine" of Christian fellowship. It is far easier to fuss than to fellowship. Complaint is far easier than community. It is far harder to live the life of a "saint."

This highlights the need for *the forgiveness of sins* as crucial to both sainthood and community. We find many examples and exemplars of forgiveness throughout the Bible. Job, after being horrifically treated by his "friends," is asked by God to forgive them, to offer sacrifice on their behalf. In the New Testament, Steven, while being stoned by his persecutors, cries out to God for them to be forgiven. Both examples find their perfection in the life of Jesus Christ. Christ lived, suffered and died in order to forgive. When we examine these, as well as other examples, we find a common theme: Forgiveness frames and builds community.

But forgiveness is not always, if at any time, a comfortable character quality. It's messy and inconvenient. *St. Mark 2: 1 — 12* makes this abundantly clear. In this text we read the story of the paralytic who is carried by four friends to see Jesus. The home where Jesus was speaking was so crowded that they could not get into the house. As a result, they went up onto the roof and began removing the roofing. Eventually, after the roof was removed, these four friends lowered the paralytic before Jesus who declared and demonstrated the paralytic's forgiveness.

Here is a wonderful illustration of forgiveness. How would you feel if, during the worship service, people were making noise, being a general disruption, and destroying your roof-top experience? The communion of saints is very much like this. People are people. People do stupid things. Difficulties occur. Personalities clash. Our neat little lives often become disturbed. Our feathers often become ruffled. And, on many occasions, as in this story, these difficulties often revolve around our religious sensibilities. Unfortunately, on many occasions, divisions are entirely unnecessary as they in no way involve essential Christian doctrine or appropriate Christian lifestyle. Sadly many divisions revolve around personal preferences and personal levels of comfort. We have not learned to live by the dictum of St. Augustine of Hippo:

"In essentials; unity
In non-essentials; liberty
In all things; charity"

The communion of saints requires the forgiveness of sins....and shortcomings.

I BELIEVE (...) IN THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY, AND THE LIFE EVERLASTING

If we are believers in Jesus Christ we will be spending eternity together. If we think about it, this prospect is rather frightening. We will be forced to spend eternity with a diversity of people who do not share many of our sensibilities --- except a basic commitment to Christ. How do we feel about breaking fellowship with those with whom we will be committed to spend eternity?

The story of the paralytic and his four friends highlights another important issue about community: We are all in this mess together. When we reflect on this story it is not just the paralytic who had a problem. Everyone connected with him had a problem. Can you imagine having to carry this paralytic around from place to place, month after month and year after year? As compassionate as we might consider ourselves to be, carrying "dead weight" around would quickly become very tiresome.

But, in fact, this is what we are called to do. We are all in some ways crippled by life, and we are all called to carry each others' burdens. Often, these "burdens" we bear are the people with whom we share a life. Only carrying such burdens fulfills the law of Christ which is love.

We often speak of our resurrected bodies. We look forward to the time when our bodies will begin to fully reflect the intention of God. And this truly is something to anticipate. Nevertheless, regardless of our resurrected bodies, we will be together

forever. We cannot hope (like I sometimes do) that our "mansion just over the hilltop" will include a sufficient amount of distance away from other people who so easily annoy and frustrate us. According to C. S. Lewis in his book, *The Great Divorce*, this is really a picture of Hell, not Heaven.

We are all --- and forever will be --- in this together.

AMEN

In *Swear to God: The Promise and Power of the Sacraments* Dr. Scott Hahn highlights many important issues well worth our prayerful consideration. Central to his thesis is the concept of oath-taking and oath-breaking. Hahn suggests that when we say "Amen" we are, in fact, making an oath to abide by what we have said. We bind ourselves by our words.

When we say "Amen" to the Apostles' Creed we are binding ourselves to its priorities, principles and practices. This applies equally to all of the proper applications that might be drawn from it. That is, we bind ourselves to believe what we say, and commit ourselves to behave in ways that properly emanate from those beliefs. This implies that, while definition and defense of these essential doctrines are critical, the social expectations appropriate to these beliefs are also of crucial importance. Often, while defending and defining our beliefs, we neglect the behaviors associated with them. To say "Amen" to the theology of the Apostles' Creed is to affirm our commitment to a lifestyle appropriate to these beliefs. Anything less than this is hypocritical.

The Apostles' Creed, apart from definition and defense of doctrine, is a commitment to life in community. By saying "Amen" we are binding ourselves to each other in an effort to build community. Are we willing to say the creed and commit to its communal expectations?

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Originally released under the imprint of the *Missionary Society of Saint Jude (Anglican)* in about 2004 / 2005, Reverend Richmond maintains the rights to this document.

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