

## PASTOR'S CORNER

*For the remainder of the summer I will be printing a series of essays concerning the Apostles Creed. This addendum to our weekly bulletin ends my reflections on the Creed.*

### **The Creed: *From there he will come to judge the living and the dead***

This proposition speaks of two interrelated doctrines: the Second Coming of Christ (or *Parousia*) and the General Judgment. First, let me make it clear what the Church believes happens following our death, assuming that our death takes place before the Parousia. At our death, each of us will be immediately judged by God. Although the term “judgment” has been traditionally used, what happens is in no way like a scene from a courtroom. There is no judge or jury, no arguments to be made, no extenuating circumstances to be explored or uncovered. There is only a light before which we stand (so to speak); namely, the revealing light of God’s truth, beauty and love. The only issue at stake is whether or not we will stand before God in this instant of judgment or flee.

Understand that there is no continuous or deliberative time here. We are revealed for what we have made ourselves to be; it’s just that simple. God’s light strips us of our pretensions and self-defenses and shows us who and what we have made ourselves into in the course of our life on earth. If we are persons of faith who have tried to live our lives in the manner of a Christian disciple, then we will experience this light as merciful and just and will open ourselves all the more to its healing rays. For sure, some of us will no doubt experience this healing process (occurring in what’s called ‘episodic time’) as somewhat purgatorial (or cleansing in a healing sense), but we would not dream of fleeing from Him, for faith in Christ remains our anchor. Once healed and purified, we then are united with Christ in his body, the Church triumphant (the communion of saints). Our existence is not yet perfected, however, since we are still dis-embodied souls somehow mysteriously living in Christ’s Mystical Body. We are fully happy, yet not yet complete in the full sense of our human nature as an integrated unity of body and soul.

If we are persons of no faith, self-centered and absorbed, knowing only our own self-interests and having no communion with the divine, then the light of God’s judgment will cause us to instantly flee. Same divine love, different result. Since one cannot flee from God’s omnipresence, the only place for the damned to flee is inward. And this is exactly what they do; they flee inward into their own mind, a mind which they share and defend against others of their ilk, creatures both demonic and human. One can only imagine the horror of the souls of the damned floating in a miasma of hatred and fear, so horrific, that it makes Dante’s Inferno look like a pleasure island.

At the end of time, Jesus will bodily return into the midst of his creation to bring down the curtain on time, space and becomingness. As he appears, he perfects. Part of this perfection process is what has come to be known as the general resurrection and judgment. The general judgment of the living (those still alive when Christ returns) and the dead (those who have died and been individually judged beforehand) occurs only after we have been reunited with our now glorified bodies. We know little of these bodies except that they exist in what can only be called a gloried physical universe. They cannot die or grow sick or be injured or harmed in any way. All souls, now embodied, will be brought before Christ, the saved and the damned.

The saved will inhabit the transformed and transfigured universe for all eternity; a state that can be best described as “ever new.” The damned (those who flee from God’s love and mercy) will exist in a state of perceived separation from God for all eternity; a state best described as “never new.” From their perspective, they will live in a self-created world of pure illusion where the powerful rule and the weak are eternally preyed upon. From the perspective of the saved, the damned will probably appear comatose in hospital beds, forever inhabiting worlds of their own fevered imaginations. We will love them, as God will, but they will be forever beyond our communion. This is indeed chilling and should give all pause. How remarkable the gift of ‘free will’, so profound a gift, that God will not intervene against those creatures who freely choose to turn their backs upon him.

**The Creed: *I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints***

The third and final section of the creed begins, fittingly, with a reference to the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. There follows two ecclesiastical references to the Holy Spirit’s primary work begun at Pentecost. As has been said before, where one person of the Trinity acts, all three act in unity. That being said, there is another sense in which certain manifestations of God in creation are the special work of one of the persons in particular; as if that person spearheaded the intervention, as it were. For example, the incarnation is clearly a manifestation most visibly of the Son. In the same manner, Pentecost is an especial manifestation of the Holy Spirit. The other persons are present since we can certainly and rightly claim that the Descent of the Spirit is a descent of the Spirit of the Father and the Son; nonetheless, it is not heretical to see the Holy Spirit in the forefront of this action.

This is why we are called “Christians,” to reflect the fact that we have been anointed with the Holy Spirit. This anointing occurs because God wants us to become not distant worshipers of his divinity, but participants in it. This can only happen if God’s Spirit, the Spirit of his Son, transforms our fallen spirit into one like his own; restoring us to his image and likeness. The germination of this Spirit in our souls occurs through faith and is brought to a supernatural presence in the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. Though in seminal form, the Holy Spirit is instantly at work transforming our moribund spirits into a reality like Himself. This transformative process has been entrusted by Jesus to the Holy Spirit in and through the Church he founded upon his Apostles. This relationship between disciple, Christ and his Church is a synergistic and intimate one.

The Spirit comes from Christ through and in his Church. This is why we dare to say that there is no salvation outside of the Church. The Church is the supernatural vehicle through which the Spirit is made available to mankind. The principle ways in which He is made available are through Word and Sacrament as safeguarded by the Magisterium of the Church. There are no private relationships with God; there are only personal relationships with Him occurring in and through the mediation of the Church (whether such mediation is discerned or brought about in an overt institutional way or not). This is why we affirm in the creed that there is only one, holy, catholic and apostolic church (the Apostles’ Creed shortens this fuller proposition to “the holy catholic Church.”) Unity and apostolicity are both assumed and contained in the following phrase, “the communion of saints.”

The communion of saints is the Church, which is the Body of Christ, which is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. There are three aspects of this one communion: transient, purifying, and permanent. The transient communion of saints is none other than the pilgrim Church on earth. You and I are members of this communion. It is transient because it is changeable. There is a sense that it can be described as

transformative and a sense in which it can be described as unstable. It is without doubt best described as a battle for faith. For this reason the Church on earth is summed up most excellently by the term 'the Church militant.'

The purifying communion are those souls transitioning in a stable manner through a state of being we call Purgatory. Their guaranteed goal is heaven, but now they are undergoing their final transformation and purification before they enter that state. We 'below' are in communion with these souls and should pray for them as they do for us. Prayer for the dead is a spiritual work of mercy and one of the ways in which we hope to strengthen our faith while the issue of our salvation remains in doubt. The souls in Purgatory pray for us as part of their process of purification and penance. This communion is best summed up by the descriptor, the Church Penitent or Suffering. Purgatory is hard work, but joyful work.

Finally, there is the fullness of the communion of saints towards which we yearn. This is a permanent state of blessed communion with God and with all the saints and angels in heaven (heaven being a word here more or less synonymous with a permanent state of communion with the Trinity). We do not pray for these souls for there is no need; they however pray ceaselessly for us and for the souls in Purgatory, cheering us on to the finish line. Most properly the term 'communion of saints' refers to this state, often called the Church triumphant.

Next we will conclude this extended reflection with a discussion of the means of our salvation and what that salvation is meant to culminate in.

**The Creed: *The forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.***

We are conceived as sinners. Absent divine intervention, you and I would never know communion with God. When we die here on earth, since our souls are immortal, we would consequently exist in a state outside of communion for all eternity. We call this state, hell. Thankfully, God has intervened. In fact, his promised intervention occurred from the very beginning. Immediately after the fall, God promised that a descendant of the primeval couple would eventually crush the head of the serpent who had wiled and deceived them away from grace (*Gen 3.15*). God's plan for our salvation, though eternal, unfolded throughout time, coming to its fulfillment with the birth of the Savior, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God.

Jesus' death on the cross was an act of loving atonement. Though God surely could have accomplished the reconciliation of mankind in many different ways, this was the way he chose. Jesus of Nazareth was a manifestation of perfect love come to dwell in the land of fallen darkness. Many people say they want peace, justice and concord, yet Jesus' life here on earth exposes such facile desires as lies. In fact, most of us want what we want, when we want it. To that end, we are almost always willing to go to war to get it. Protestations to the contrary are drowned out by the tsunami of human history with its endless conflicts, pogroms and genocides. To the extent that anything good has happened on earth, God deserves ALL the credit; we, on the other hand, can take full credit for the mess the planet is now in, not to mention the human soul. The proof is in the deicide of the Son of God: when perfect love came to dwell among us, we killed him.

The wages of sin is death (*Rom 6.23*) and so death we all deserve. The death being described here is eternal separation from God, not biological death. But we should read to the end of the verse: *For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom 6.23 KJV)* The gift of God is a reference to Jesus' atoning death on the cross; this is why Christians should wear the cross (or a crucifix) with pride. It is the sign of our redemption and of our freedom.

The forgiveness of sins is a gift from God which reception is accomplished through that faith which leads to baptism. The Sacrament of Baptism achieves the purification of the soul and the reconciliation of the sinner with God. Because of this, communion is restored and the baptized individual becomes a member of

the Church, which is Christ's Body. He has become an adopted son of God, and as such is entitled to fulfill God's intended plan of bringing all men into eternal beatitude. While on earth, this state of sanctifying grace can regrettably be lost through sin. This occurrence is called deadly sin (or mortal sin). But God is ever merciful and, while deliberation and temporal decision making remain open to us, we can choose to avail ourselves of God's forgiveness through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. When confession is used in this manner, it acts like nothing other than an effective re-baptism. This is because it restores sanctifying grace and reestablishes us in a relationship with God in and through his Church.

If we die in this grace and enter immortality, this permanent state of communion with God results in everlasting life in the company of Jesus, Mary, and all the angels and saints. Everlasting life has already begun and it will continue through death. In truth, everlasting life is the destiny of all humans, whether they end up in heaven or hell. Immortality cannot be avoided, for it is our nature as creatures created in the image and likeness of God. Even if the likeness is lost through sin, we will still live forever. This should be a very sobering thought, for where and how we live in the afterlife is completely up to us.

The resurrection of the body occurs at the end of time when Jesus comes in glory to draw down the curtain on his creation. All, the good and the bad (*see Matt 25.31-46*), are bodily raised from the dead at this second coming of the Lord. These bodies are immortal and glorified; they cannot corrupt or grow sick and they can never die. This is in keeping with the "new heavens and the new earth" that are established by the Lord at his Parousia. Again, all mankind is raised immortal from the dead, whether bound for heaven or hell.

The Apostles' Creed is an ancient symbol (summary) of our faith. All Catholics are required to believe in and profess this faith in the manner proposed by the Church in order to remain in communion with God and with the community of his faithful. We acknowledge this adherence to the content of our faith by saying "Amen" at the end of the creed's recitation each week. This 'Amen' is echoed later when we say the same right before we receive the sign of our communion with God, the Most Holy Eucharist. If we cannot say 'Amen' to the content of the creed, then we cannot receive communion since our failure to do so results in an effective excommunication and could even constitute a mortal sin. Knowing our faith is therefore very important.

I hope that my short reflections over these summer months have been helpful to you. Should you like to delve more deeply into any of these saving propositions, I advise you to consult the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which goes into much greater depth.