

Chapter xxi: *The feel of the Creed*

THESE NOTES ARE DANCING their way through the majestic ceremonies and merry realities of Mass. We're now in the middle third of Mass, the work of the Word, and for the last three weeks have been considering the very wordy business of the Nicene Creed, sung by the congregation after the climactic reading of the Gospel and before the sermon. We described why the Credo needs to be there, and accounted for its shape the only way its shape can be accounted for: it is a war-trophy from the great dogmatic crises that began in the 310s and wound down, at least in the West, after 451.

Last week's description of those crises was very hard work; this week things are much milder; but we do need to tidy up, not least because the Credo as sung by much of the Anglican Communion is in small ways out of kilter.

Monkeying with the Creed: two Western wickednesses.

DOGOMATIC DETAILS ARE NOT NECESSARILY trivial, as we have reflected over the last few weeks. Apparently small, abstract mistakes in christology (the science of the nature of Christ) are quite enough, given time, to ruin Churches and overthrow Faiths.

But on the other hand, some dogmatic details are trivial, or at least the cause of unnecessary argument and fury. One of these vain speculation has infested our Creed, to the great grief and confusion of Christendom.

If you have it to hand, look at the original text of the Nicene Creed in the *Freeze-Frame* of two weeks back (pages 160-161). You'll see that the Creed declares that God is Trinity and Unity: Father, Son and Holy Ghost. The Father simply eternally *Is*. There is also eternally the uncreated Son, *begotten* from the Father. And there us eternally *Spiritum veritatis qui a Patre procedit, The Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father*.¹

What is this eternal *begetting*, what is this timeless *proceeding* in the heart of Godhead? We have no idea: it's absolutely over our heads.

Well, *how* does the Spirit proceed, then?

¹ John xv²⁶.

Greek theologians with time on their hands are inclined to speculate that the Spirit proceeds from the Father – *through* the Son; Latin theologians with time on their hands that the Spirit proceeds from the Father – *and from* the Son.

Is there a difference between these two formulæ? Probably not. Anyway the question is impious and silly: we cannot know, and do not need to know. For these inscrutable transactions in the core of Godhead make no difference to our understanding of the incarnation, which is what Christianity is about, and what Christian theologians ought to be concerned with. The Holy Ghost is given to the Church so that we can understand the incarnation more deeply. As Christ said at the Last Supper: *When the Spirit of truth, is come . . . he shall not speak of himself, but . . . He shall glorify me.*² We are in no position to know more about the internal workings of God than we need to know.

Nonetheless, our characteristic family trait of bickering is never cured. When all is quiet, quarrelsomeness seeks new ways to express itself. In the sixth century, certain mischievous Spanish monks began to tinker with the Creed which it was their business to chant faithfully at their Masses and offices. They slipped into the phrase about the Holy Ghost *qui ex Patre procedit, Who proceedeth from the Father*, the word *Filioque*, which means *and the Son*.

Unfortunately this adulteration caught on and spread; the Emperor Charlemagne took an unhappy shine to it (alas for managerial illiterates who take an interest in theology!); and Charlemagne leaned on Pope Leo III to make “*qui ex Patre Filioque procedit*” the standard formula in the Latin West. Leo supinely agreed, and must still be shrieking in purgatory as angels club him with iron bars, shouting in many tongues, especially Russian and Greek: *Oaf! oaf! oaf!*

The Eastern Church was of course disgruntled, and remains disgruntled, by the *Filioque* clause. Even if we were sure that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son* (which we don’t), and even if we knew the fact to be important (which we don’t), we would have had no business intruding it into the Creed. The Creed is Œcumenical, the common property of East and West. What divides us from our Eastern Orthodox brothers is mainly church government and history (most of the faults being on our side). But one serious doctrinal barrier remains too: this pesky word *Filioque*.

In the end it will have to come out. Of course there’s no point in any one Communion or province of the Western Church, let alone any one congregation, dropping it. That would just disrupt Western unity without recovering our unity with the East. The wound will have to be healed by another general Council, and I hope we live to see it. Meanwhile, in our joyful singing of the Creed each Sunday, it would be well, every so often, when we reach the doctored article – “*proceedeth from the Father and the Son*” – to reflect on our family flaw, and sigh for it. Perhaps the gaoler-angels will hear our sigh, and pause for a second as they thrash the pliability out of Leo.

One more, shoddy, shameful deed to report. The Tudor villains who produced the English Prayer Book were in revolt against the Catholic Church; they were, quite properly, nervous about saying at the end of the Creed that they believed (the Western Church had already rather oddly taken to saying ‘I believe *in*’ rather than ‘I believe’) *unam, sanctam, Catholicam et Apostolicam Ecclesiam, One holy, catholic, and apostolic*

² John xvi^{13f}.

Church. So the Reformers cut out *sanctam, holy* – proof that their consciences were troubled. Brutes. Vandals. Common thieves. Of course this excision has been corrected in later versions of the Prayer Book, including ours.³

So much for credal crimes in the West.

Defying the Creed: two odd Eastern survivals.

ARIANISM, ONCE IT HAD BEEN cast out by the Church, withered theologically, surviving only amongst Teutonic peoples too coarse to know better.

But [Nestorian Christianity](#), oddly, continued to exist amongst civilised people, though outside the frontiers of the Empire, in the pagan empire of Persia. The Persian Church, which was as old as the age of the Apostles, declared itself on the side of Nestorius, and in due course distanced itself from Greek and Latin Christendom by formulating a position on the two Natures more Nestorian than Nestorius ever was. Despite this error, the Persian Nestorians remained vigorous for centuries, evangelising western China and parts of Africa. In the end most of them became reconciled to the Council of Ephesus and Christian orthodoxy. But real Nestorianism survives even now, although it is terribly shrunken to a few valleys in northern Iraq and various immigrant colonies in this country. (Saddam Hussein's foreign minister, Tariq Ali, is a Nestorian Christian: I realise this is not much of an advertisement.)

And, disastrously, [Monophysite Christianity](#) didn't evaporate either. On the contrary, Egypt and Palestine and Syria, the ancient centre of Christendom and the first home of the Church, resisted the Chalcedonian definition with bitterness, with increasing bitterness. Indeed, the peoples of those regions came to regard eccentric understanding of Christ as their defining characteristic (rather as folk in Montana treat eccentric views on firearm regulation). Rejecting Two Natures christology was what made a Syrian peasantwoman think of herself as a Syrians, not just the wife of a citizens of imperial Rome; and execrating the metaphysics of Chalcedon was how an Egyptian share-cropper defined his Egyptianness. She and he may not have been able to follow all the christological arguments (although we oughtn't to underestimate the theological acumen of common folk in that argumentative age). But they knew that their own deposed bishops and abbots were heroes, and martyrs to the cause of Christ's One Nature. And so they became happy to riot and rebel against the apostate emperors; a defiant error in christology degenerated into defiant nationalism. For the first time in many centuries, the existence of the Empire was resented by its citizenry.

I've mentioned last week how the emperors in Constantinople sometimes strained Chalcedonian orthodoxy to accommodate these angry provinces, and sometimes tried to persecute them back into the fold. Nothing worked. In the end all the Christian provinces of Asia and Africa were lost, utterly lost.

Monophysite Christianity in the end cannot *work*. A Christ whose Nature is merely divine is no man, His incarnation comes unravelled, and the baffled Christian,

³ The English Prayer Book also turned *ex Patre natum, begotten of the Father* into *begotten of His Father* (a freakish tautology); and rendered *Dominum et vivificante* – two separate titles for the Spirit – as *the Lord and Giver of life*: another bungle, because it sounds like a single title. But this is small beer.

cheated of the consoling embrace of the immanent Man-God, longs for some clearer Faith that might instead proclaim God's transcendence, His triumphant sovereignty.

Eventually such a religion arose far out in the Arabian desert, an exaggeration of the Monophysite impulse to separate God and Man. It was called Islam, the path of submission. And when the Islamic armies swept into the Levant and North Africa, the Monophysite population welcomed them as deliverers from the Chalcedonian tyranny: anything was better than rule by the Faith of a Two Natured Christ!

*If a man abide not in me, Jesus warned His first disciples, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and . . . cast them into the fire.*⁴ The Monophysites did not abide in the vine of the one Church. A few (the Egyptian 'Coptic' Church, for instance) remained and still remain Christian, but only by rediscovering the Two Natures of Christ, using a terminology different from Chalcedon's. The vast majority of Monophysites lapsed into Islam.

That is, perhaps, what must always happen outside the wall of the orthodox Creed. In the end, if christology is perverted, Christ is altogether lost. Thus north Africa and west Asia, including the Holy Land itself, were lost to Christianity – forever, it would seem. Those rich and lovely nations passed, *via* heresy, out of the Faith altogether.

This huge loss of territory has been Christianity's greatest, most irreparable loss, and is something else to meditate on when we sing the Creed. Beyond that rugged bastion of words – are the armies of the Infidel! The Church cannot die, but perhaps without Chalcedon she would have shrunk fearfully, as a Monophysite East and even, eventually, a Monophysite West found their mutated Faith collapse under the weight of the human soul's longing for a lucid God. Europe would have turned Muslim; no humanism or Renaissance could ever have bloomed, for without the hope of a human Christ whatever is human is low and passing, and to paint the human body is loathsome idolatry. The Pilgrim Fathers who landed in Massachusetts would have been a grim, fanatical sect on the periphery of Islam, rather than a grim, fanatical sect on the periphery of Christianity; Virginia would have been planted by *bien pensant* Shi'ites, not by sprightly Anglicans; Scarlett O'Hara would have lived and died in *pardah*; and a gloomy, teetotal, Muslim America would wake each morning to *muezzins* wailing in Texan accents that God is distant and One.

But it's too sad to think often along these lines. Let us press on.

Liturgical use of the Creed.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MASS sometimes makes a strange story. During these ructures between Chalcedonian and Monophysite bishops, a certain Monophysite bishop cunningly introduced the practice of having his people recite the Nicene Creed after the Gospel – a startling departure in the history of the Mass. The Nicene Creed had always been meant as a test for theologically dodgy Christians, not as liturgy. It was at first as weird as having a congregation ceremoniously recite together the articles of their rector's contract. But making the Nicene formula part of worship was meant as a counterblast to the Chalcedonian formula. Monophysites of course thought that everyone else had lapsed from Nicene orthodoxy at Chalcedon. Chalcedonian

⁴ John xv⁶.

Christians in the East reluctantly kept this custom in place as they recovered ground, because to suppress the Nicene Creed at Mass would seem like admitting infidelity to the Council of Nicæa.

The Church in Rome also detested the idea of singing the Creed at Mass: for what was such a practice but medicine against heresy? And Rome (said the Romans) had never even sniffed a heresy – which wasn't true, but made for a nice pose. Eventually, though, a dastardly emperor named Henry, interfering in what wasn't his business and making a hash of things, told the Pope to introduce the ceremony, and the Pope grudgingly did. This fresh cave-in by Rome occurred in the eleventh century. But the Pope insisted that in the Creed was to be said or sung only on Sundays and high days, to show that it wasn't essential. This pattern proved permanent, and we inherit it.

Meanwhile, of course, the Credo became, with the *Gloria*, *Sanctus*, *Benedictus* and *Agnus*, one of the five major musical glories of the Mass (although in this church we generally use an English, congregational setting of the Credo, rather than a Latin, choral one. Alas?).

Order because of chaos, unity from faction.

HUMANS ARE WRETCHES and Christians are squabblesome wretches, but divine Providence is cunning. *Because* of our flaws and fights, because of our interfering emperors and fractious mobs, we all – Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, and even some happily-inconsistent Protestants – publicly recite at our great services, as an act of worship and solemn assertion of belief, the same 'Nicene' Creed.

If we overlook the scandal of the *Filioque* thrust in and the *Sanctam ecclesiam* cut out – a *proceedeth from . . . the Son* which oughtn't to be there and is, a *holy, catholic, apostolic Church* which ought to be there and sometimes isn't – this unanimity is something to glory in. Our recitation of the Nicene Creed is an act of astonishing unity, despite the doctrinal anarchy of a Western Christendom. What begin as a grim safeguard, and continues as a act of contrition for past broils, ends as a shout of universal fellowship and triumph amongst Christians.

Frankly, it would be better if the Church sometimes varied the Nicene Creed with the Chalcedonian definition, which is a good deal more exciting, as I tried to show last week. But Chalcedon's vision of Christ is with us, as an unspoken explanation of the words of Nicæa and Constantinople, and should churn us up delight.

We've had enough history. Delight in the Creed, sensuous delight, is the note on which I wish to end. Our freeze-frame shows us standing and exultantly singing the formula of Nicæa. What does it mean to us? How does it feel?

The sensuous Creed.

I'VE SAID THE CREEDS are a wall. A wall around what? Around a garden, which is knowledge of the incarnation of God. The Christian Faith is a walled garden.

That, indeed, is how Christ is represented as singing to His bride, the Church, in the comely erotic poem we call *The Song of Songs*. *Hortus conclusus soror mea sponsa, A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse.*

*A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse;
 a spring shut up, a fountain sealed.
 Thy plants are an orchard of pomegranates, with pleasant fruits;
 camphire, with spikenard, spikenard and saffron;
 calamus and cinnamon,
 with all trees of frankincense;
 myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices:
 A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters,
 and streams from Lebanon.
 Awake, O north wind;
 and come, thou south;
 blow upon my garden,
 that the spices thereof may flow out.⁵*

Within the Church's walls is a riot of fragrant orchards and exotic spice; the winds come and carry the scent of it into the world, so that men's mouths water to be inside her. But she is not a wild forest, she must be a *walled* orchard, a fountain of gardens sealed off from the world.

Delicious trees not only require walls. They somehow call them into existence. Hard-edged definitions rise up because of the lushness and profusion of what lies within, and keep it profuse. Hardness and softness lean on each other. The poetry and ease of Christian faith conjures up the hard prose of the Creeds. The craggy Creed keeps our experience of our divine Brother succulent.

This is a tricky idea, but I think it's important. The flinty Creed has to be there if we are to delight carelessly in the love of Christ, and the Creed is therefore itself sensuous. Terms like *hypostasis* and *homoousion* nourish easy joy in God in people who have never heard them. *Out of the strong came forth sweetness.*⁶ The richly-watered garden walls itself; the walls enrich the garden. The anathemas protect love; love forges the anathemas.

Recall – since we're in this lyric, amorous mode – Tennyson's description of what it is like for a young man to lie in dewy grass at dawn, watching and feeling the new sun. *I changed with thy mystic change, sighs Tithonus,*

*and felt my blood
 Glow with the glow that slowly crimson'd all
 Thy presence and thy portals, while I lay,
 Mouth, forehead, eyelids, growing dewy-warm
 With kisses balmier than half-opened buds
 Of April, and could hear the lips that kiss'd
 Whispering I knew not what of wild and sweet,
 Like that strange song I heard Apollo sing,
 While Ilion like a mist rose into towers.⁷*

⁵ Song of Songs iv^{12-16a}.

⁶ Judges xiv¹⁴.

⁷ www.everypoet.com/ar.../Tennyson/tennyson_contents_tithonus.htm

Illion is Troy, the ultimate walled city; its walls sprang up at the music of Apollo. The Chalcedonian formula is the strictest possible metaphysical definition and ban, but it arose at the sound of the Church's strange song to the Son of God. For the last four weeks we have watched the Creed soar up – high, serious, hard words. The words are deliberately tough, because they are a wall; but watching them rise ought to have been as sensual and heady as sunrise, because of what lies within those walls.

Gestures.

RITUAL FREES US TO SAY THINGS we could not otherwise say, and say them in a way we could not otherwise say them. Rite allows us to differentiate words. They are not all equally important. The Mass is not about equality, even equality of phrases. Words are not all equally important; they are hierarchical.

The recitation of the Creed in Mass interprets itself through its rituals. We bow at the name of JESUS, and when we declare the resurrection of the dead we cross ourselves, appropriating that staggering idea to this mortal body. But there is one passage of the Creed that is more than the rest. The rest is all *wall*; but now we come to the perfumed orchard within the walls.

Christianity is the religion of the incarnation. The point of it all is Christ, God and Man. Our understanding of that union has been protected by such technical language as *Person* and *Substance*. But when we get to what has been protected, we are inside the ramparts, and luxuriating in the garden itself. When we declare of the Son, with a crescendo of joy, that

*propter nostram salutem
descendit de cælis.*

*Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto
ex Maria Virgine:*

ET HOMO FACTUS EST

for our salvation,

[He] came down from heaven,

*and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost
of the Virgin Mary,*

AND WAS MADE MAN

– then the sensuality of the Creed overflows. No more sober standing and reciting the formula of the Nicene Creed now. Hope, joy, astonishment, delight push us down. The whole congregation kneels to pronounce and receive the inward truth of the Faith:

HOMO FACTUS EST.

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