

Coda to the Creed: An Appreciation

What I call the coda to the Apostles' Creed is its final list of phrases describing four major doctrines: "the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting." Experienced people can especially appreciate these great doctrines because they address our deepest human concerns, namely, existential loneliness, personal guilt, physical mortality, and our insatiably infinite longings. In other words, we are given four basic doctrines that bring our spirits hope in the face of the most oppressive psychological burdens, namely, guilt, loneliness, mortality, and longing.

Our Physical Mortality

Perhaps the heaviest of these burdens is the realization of our inevitable death, though for some of us it is the load of guilt we carry, consciously or unconsciously.

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For many people it is a sense of aloneness. Overlying this we have a deep, and necessarily unrequited, appetite for the infinite, a conscious or unconscious longing.

One of the worst parts of “the human predicament” is the inevitability of our eventually dying—what Zechariah calls living in “the darkness of the shadow of death.” But Zechariah says that, in addition to a promise of liberation from this “shadow of death,” Christ brings “knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of sins,” making us “free to worship him without fear.”

No human being, regardless of how fortunate in matters of health or wealth or domestic comfort, is free of impending death and occasional realizations of that inevitability. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews mentions this terror in chapter 2. He speaks of the “fear of death which keeps us in slavery all our lives.” And we recall the emotional passages in some of the Psalms about the burden of death, Psalm 90 for example, along with poignant words from Ecclesiastes.

So in the Apostles’ Creed we affirm our conviction that there will be for us a “resurrection of the body and life everlasting.” The trauma of our earthly death will be really a kind of “birth trauma.” This doctrine may well be, in our day and age, the hardest to accept of all Christian teachings. At the same time it is one of the most attractive. Some historians attribute the rapid spread of early Christianity to the news of Christ’s bodily resurrection and to people’s strong desire to participate in it.

Our Guilt

We also affirm at the end of the Creed our belief in “the forgiveness of sins,” a doctrine of enormous consolation. On the face of it, our guilt is irremovable because offenses against God are against the Infinite and we are only finite. Recall Psalm 65 with its doublet: “Too heavy



for us our offenses; but you wipe them away.” The heaviness of guilt can be a force for good as well as evil, but it is still a burden.

Guilt is one of the most powerful forces in human behavior. It can accompany both a suspicion of our own culpability and a state of actual culpability. It entails, as the dictionary says, a felt need to repay or requite the persons offended. It is related to feelings of remorse and shame, an awareness and regret over our responsibility for evil. Psalm 65 notes, “We are overcome by our sins.” Guilt can cast a shadow over a whole life. Nevertheless, we know it can be relieved, at least in part, by forgiveness. We need to accept forgiveness as well as bestow it. If we try, instead, to wipe our own offense from our memories, the psychological damage may be difficult to assess. Pope St. Clement wrote that it is better to admit one’s sins than to harden one’s heart.

Guilt can drive us to inflict grave harm on ourselves and on others. It can also drive us to do good things. Acquittal or forgiveness removes punishment, but it does not remove the historical fact of guilt. That fact keeps us grateful for forgiveness. Guilt seems different from shame in that it is internal while shame is more external, or perhaps one relates to offenses against God and his law while the other relates to offenses against society and its conventions. Shame and guilt sometimes overlap, and in a moral society would do so more frequently.

A theological problem about forgiveness may occur to us in connection with Christ’s telling the Good Thief on the cross, “This day you will be with me in paradise.” It is

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easy to see how Christ as a Divine Person could forgive the sins that Dismas committed against God, but it is not easy to see how Christ could forgive sins committed by a thief against his victims—and for Christ to do so without the victims’ prior consent. One would think that such forgiveness belongs also to the victims. Is Christ the spokesman of forgiveness for all victims of the sins of robbery even though he himself is not (or does not seem to be) one of the direct victims? In a parallel question, can Christ forgive the sins we commit against ourselves even if we do not? The answer has to be yes. But on what grounds must we say so?

There are probably two or three ways here to try to answer the question. First, incarnational. Christ is not a mere human person; his personhood transcends all human persons, and he can speak for us all (just as in his two natures he can speak for human beings as well as for God). He is “the Son of Man” as well as one of the three Persons, so that he is not only our spokesman before God but also the spokesman to all people and for all people. Second, evangelical. Christ tied his gospel message intimately to the forgiveness that we must exercise toward one another. Insofar as his message is successful and insofar as we are with him, we forgive each other and leave vengeance (or the popular term “closure”) to God. The Our Father, both in context and content, emphasizes that point. Also, when in Mark 12:34 Christ praises the scribe, it is because he sees the intimate connection between love of God and love of neighbor. Third, eschatological. It seems that one of the main purposes of the Last Judgment is to demonstrate the justice of God. It is no doubt mysterious, but every thief, including the Good Thief, will have found that justice has been done for his victims, and the victims will find it so to.

The word “trespass” in the Our Father is a good choice, since our sins are like trespassing on the rights of God.



God is offended but not harmed by our sins. Of course, the reason why he is offended by our sins is that these sins do harm to us and often to our neighbors, all of whom God loves. Loving us, he does not want to see us or anyone else harmed. The adage “Love me, love my dog” can be extended to God’s desire that all people love one another.

Our Insatiable Longing

Is there not at least a third affliction shared by all mankind, namely, an appetite for *more*, feeling we can never have enough in this life? We want not only an immortal and guilt-free life, but we want it to be unencumbered in all respects, wholly and completely fulfilled.

Thoreau’s famous Walden aphorism has it that “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” and Virgil

wrote: *Sunt lacrimae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt*—there are the tears of things, and the realities of death bear on one’s spirit. Paul gives a Christian slant to Virgil in Romans 8:21: “It was not for any fault on the part of creation that it was unable to

attain its purpose [that is, was subject to futility]; it was made so by God. But creation still retains the hope of being freed, like us, from its slavery to decadence, and to enjoy the same freedom and glory as the children of God. From the beginning till now the entire creation, as we know, has been groaning in one great act of giving birth—and not only creation but all of us.”

We frequently sense that we are hemmed in by our finite circumstances since we aspire to much more than

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we have. In fact, we possess a capacity for the Infinite (whether we are aware of the Infinite or not). Our life-long dissatisfaction with having an ever greater number of good things in this life should make us aware of this capacity. We, though, often shield ourselves from deeper aspirations and real fears by pursuing and possessing material things. And nonbelievers may try to fulfill such deep aspirations by a life of the mind and an appreciation of the arts—which, after all, are finite too.

It was popular a generation ago to refer to the conditions of our earthly life as “the human predicament” and to our life as one of “exile.” A real pessimism envelops some people. The Rumanian-French aphorist E.M. Cioran drew this depressing conclusion: “Some people still wonder if life has a meaning. In fact it all comes down to knowing whether it is bearable.” But the Creed promises that our reward is everlasting. All longings will be met, including the desire for meaning.

Our Loneliness

“The holy Catholic Church” and “the Communion of Saints.” We are convinced that we are not alone. It is true that our uniqueness as individuals separates us from all other people. But, as St. Paul implies, the parts of one’s body, the leg or the ear, are not individually lonely. When we as individuals are fully incorporated in the Body of Christ, we will have found a cure for all loneliness, both existential and social. The Church Glorious will be sociable.

At the beginning of the Creed, we are assured that God is not lonely: there are three Persons in God. That revelation is a source of great consolation, a consolation apparently denied to Jews and Muslims (whose God is understood as very lonely). In the Christian vision, as Alfons Deeken SJ put it years ago, “God exists as a fellowship and friendship of three Divine Persons. In the Trinity each Person has his existence



only in relation to the others, and it is only in existing for the others, in the process of infinite giving and receiving of love, that each One is fully himself. . . . Self-being does not decrease through self-giving. Thus the Trinity, as the source and model of all personhood and community, shows us that the highest perfection of a person is not self-assertion, isolation, and independence, but rather openness and loving commitment to others” (*Growing Old, and How to Cope with It*, Paulist Press, 1972).



Prayer Suggestion

There is a prayer tradition that we choose a prayer formula such as our Creed, and we find ourselves in God’s presence as we dwell on individual words or phrases of the prayer formula. Where we find relish and consolation, we remain until we feel that we should move on to another word or phrase. Then, when we have come to the end of our prayer time, we simply pray through the whole Creed in the usual way.

In the light of the reflection by Brendan Kneale FSC, we might use the last part of the Creed for our daily prayer in this fashion over some days. We might also use the whole text for our prayer in this way.