

A Creed for Today

Faith and Commitment
for Our New Earth Awareness

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Introduction

For many centuries we have proclaimed our faith through the Apostles' Creed. This beautiful prayer has served us well because it sums up the main elements of our Christian faith. In saying it, we proclaim what we believe about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the people of God, forgiveness and the next life.

However, the Apostles' Creed is not our only creed. Over the centuries more elaborate creeds were composed. Each of them is of its own period in time. Over the centuries we Christians have grown in our understanding of various aspects of our faith. In St John's gospel, Jesus promises us that 'the Holy Spirit ... will bring to your remembrance all I have said to you' (Jn 14:26) and 'when the Spirit comes he will guide you into all truth' (Jn 16:13). Consequently, successive creeds give expression to the Church's ever-deepening understanding of all that the coming of Jesus and his life, his words, his actions, his death and his resurrection mean and reveal.

Each particular creed was a response to the controversies of the period during which it was composed and each aimed to correct the incorrect interpretations of that time. For instance, in AD 325 at the Council of Nicaea and again in AD 381 at the Council of Constantinople, Church leaders found it necessary to come together and spell out in great detail the reality of what it means to say that Jesus is truly God and truly human. What emerged from these councils was the Nicene Creed, which we sometimes recite during the Eucharist.

The significant issues of faith we have to deal with today are rather different from those that preoccupied Christians at the time when the Nicene Creed was formulated. So it seems important to work towards formulating a profession of faith that will give expression to key elements of our Christian faith as we have come to understand it today. This is not a matter of replacing the traditional creeds but of taking account, firstly, of the radically different cultural situation in which we live today and, secondly, of the deeper understanding of our faith, which has evolved over the centuries. It is particularly important that the way we proclaim our faith in public and in private should take account of the major

developments in our understanding of the faith which have come through Vatican II and all that has followed it, right up to the four major documents issued by Pope Francis: *Evangelii gaudium* ('The Joy of the Gospel'), his ecology encyclical, *Laudato si'* ('Praise Be to You'), his treatment of marriage and the family in *Amoris laetitia* ('The Joy of Love'), and his reflection on spirituality in *Gaudete et exsultate* ('Rejoice and Be Glad').

THE LEGACY OF VATICAN II

The Second Vatican Council provided a breakthrough in our understanding of faith through its new teaching on the Church as the people of God and on the role of the Church in the modern world. Particularly important was its new approach to revelation, ecumenism, respect for other religions, the liturgy, freedom of conscience and human development, as well as its reaffirmation of Pope John XXIII's emphasis on human rights in his encyclical *Pacem in terris*.

But we must also recognise that the Council had other far-reaching effects. This was because it opened up the possibility of several important developments that went significantly beyond the theology and spirituality of the Council itself. It did so by liberating us from an older dualist spirituality that created an unduly sharp opposition between the soul and the body and that undervalued not only the body but also the entirety of the material world. The Council also invited us to move on from an older, escapist spirituality, one that played down the importance of this life and put all the emphasis on the next.

Firstly, this rejection of dualism and escapism, as well as the new willingness to learn from important developments that had been taking place outside the Church, opened up a space for a great enrichment of Christian spirituality by integrating into it the humanistic psychology that was developing at that time. That linkage mainly took place not during the Vatican II itself but over a period of about ten years immediately after the Council. We now take it so much for granted that healthy psychological development is integral to the formation of Christian spirituality that we can forget what little account was taken of it pre-Vatican II.

Secondly, the Council's new focus on human values created an opening in the Catholic Church for the integration of much of the feminist theology and spirituality that, up to this time, had developed mainly outside the Church. This greatly enriched our experience and understanding of our faith. This development, too, took place in the years immediately following the Council

rather than in the Council itself, but it would not have been possible if the Church had remained stuck in the largely dualistic and escapist spirituality that existed prior to Vatican II.

Thirdly, a theology and spirituality of liberation emerged in the Church, not during the Council itself but in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and it too was made possible by the theological breakthroughs of Vatican II. Also in this case, some of the main sources of this new spirituality came from outside the Church. Liberation theologians were heavily influenced by the ideas of political philosophers and social scientists in Latin America, including their insistence that low- and middle-income countries were controlled and exploited by the wealthier and more powerful countries. This development coincided with the emergence of a more humanistic version of Marxist philosophy, and another major influence was the philosopher Paulo Freire's work on consciousness-raising of impoverished and oppressed people.

ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY

All three of these post-Vatican II developments took place within about ten years of the Council. However, we are now in the midst of a fourth major development in Christian spirituality – one that has come to prominence only quite recently, even though it, like the other three, was made possible by Vatican II.

From the 1960s onwards there was a growing awareness among scholars of the crucial importance of taking account of the damage to the Earth that was an effect of the current model of economic development. A key breakthrough came in 1962 with the publication of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*. Another of the pioneers in this areas was Barbara Ward-Jackson, who was appointed as a consultant to the Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1971, and whose views were a major influence in the drafting of the document the synod issued.

Unfortunately, Vatican politics in subsequent years caused the synod's document to be largely ignored, and for almost two decades the Catholic Church lagged behind the World Council of Churches in its teaching on care for the Earth. Pope John Paul II's message for the 1990 World Day of Peace represented a new emphasis in the Catholic Church on ecological issues. In the following years there were several mentions of the need for an ecological conversion but the big advance came only in 2015, with Pope Francis' *Laudato si'* encyclical. In that document the Pope spelled out what an ecological conversion would mean

in practice (see par. 217 of *Laudato si'*, and indeed the whole of the document).

In the light of these developments in Catholic belief, and particularly the development of our ecological awareness, it is important for us to find ways of expressing our newly enriched faith in relatively short proclamations of our beliefs. These must be true to previous proclamations of faith, but they must articulate a spirituality that takes account of the new insights and responds to the challenges of our time. And they must, of course, be backed up by far more extensive treatments of the spirituality and theology that underpin these succinct statements.

My aim in this book is to attempt to express our Christian faith in the form of a 'Creed for Today.' At the end of this introduction I suggest a relatively short text for such a creed. It consists of a series of statements of our faith, covering the traditional topics: God the Creator, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the community and the future. At the end of most of the chapters, I suggest a somewhat longer credal text on the topic covered in that chapter. In these short texts and in the full creed, I have tried to use non-technical language and to avoid any controversial material.

The traditional creeds did not attempt to cover every subject that is part of our Christian faith; they focused on the central issues. Similarly in this short creed there are many aspects of Christian faith that are not named. But I have tried to name the key elements, which are – or should be – central to our Christianity today.

The main text of the book is a series of theological essays to help readers gain a deeper sense of the meaning and implications of these statements of our faith. I am including quite a number of poems, or excerpts from poems, in the hope that this will help to touch people's hearts as well as their minds. In some of the chapters I have occasionally taken a stand on a somewhat controversial issue, such as whether it is necessary that there be 'direct intervention' from God in the creation of each human person, and whether each of us exists in the form of a disembodied spirit after we die.

I think it is quite important to make a clear distinction between faith statements and theological statements. I believe that one of the reasons why there is so much division in our Church today is that many Church leaders and theologians fail to distinguish clearly between matters of faith and sincerely held theological views that are not binding in faith. In my opinion, even the official *Catechism of the Catholic Church* does not always make this distinction sufficiently clear.¹ I hope that the creed I am proposing is one that

1 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd ed.), New York: Image Books, 2008; also http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM (accessed 2 February 2020).

can be generally accepted by Christian believers, even by people who may disagree with some of the views I express in the theological essays that make up the bulk of the book. My hope is to make a small contribution to healing and greater unity in the Church.

Very occasionally I have felt it necessary to deal with some technical theological issue, for instance the meaning of the word ‘person’ when applied to the persons of the Blessed Trinity. I have put this technical material into footnotes to avoid cluttering up the main text with more specialised theological topics.

In this book I would like to be of some benefit to two rather different audiences. Firstly, to those who are already committed to an ecological spirituality. It may assist them in more fully integrating the ecological dimension of their spirituality into the other aspects of their Christian faith, rather than leaving it as an extra, like the icing on a cake. Secondly, I hope that this book may bring a new enrichment to the faith and spirituality of the many people who are still practising a version of faith that in many respects dates from the period prior to Vatican II, or to the period prior to the papacy of Pope Francis.

Furthermore, I hope that the book may help to counteract the efforts of a relatively small number of priests and religious educators who have deliberately refused to take on board recent developments and who are attempting to impose on people an outdated model of Church. These are people who reject much of what Pope Francis stands for. They are resisting his effort both to implement the key teachings of Vatican II and to carry forward the spirit of Vatican II in a way that will ensure our Christian faith is both relevant to and a challenge to the world of the twenty-first century.

A CREED FOR TODAY

- We believe that the mystery within which all of us and all of creation exists is a God who is incomprehensible but is also personal, trustworthy, and bountiful.
- We believe that the Word of God is present in the stars, the trees, the plants, the animals and the people; that every creature is a gift from God that has a distinctive value and its own role in the integral web of the cosmos; that each person is unique and is called to have a loving personal

relationship with God; that all humans are equal in dignity and that the fundamental rights of all must be respected and protected.

- We believe that at God's appointed time 'the Word of God was made flesh and came to live among us' as the one 'in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell', sharing the growth, the hope, the joy, the suffering and the death of all people and of all creatures and modelling for us how to come close to this infinitely compassionate God by becoming ever more fully human.
- We believe that Jesus was tortured and died in solidarity with all humans and all creatures that are subject to suffering and death that often seems shocking and unjust and that in his dying on the Cross, he triumphed over evil by forgiving his enemies, returning good for evil. In this way he brought forgiveness for sin, healing, reconciliation, redemption and a firm hope of a saved and transformed creation.
- We believe that he rose from death as 'the first fruits' of a transformed universe that offers a new life of fulfilled communion with God for humans and all of creation.
- We believe that the Church is a sign of the communion of all humans and all creatures with God and with each other; that it is called to be, by God's grace, an effective means to bring about that communion; that in the sacraments Christian believers are spiritually nourished and that through them humanity and the whole of the created universe is uplifted and gives praise to God.
- We believe in the creative Spirit of God at work in creating our evolving universe, from the first moment of its existence right up to the present and into the future; that from the very beginning of humanity there have been Spirit-guided prophetic individuals and wisdom teachers who challenged and nurtured their communities by speaking inspired Words of God to them and that the Holy Spirit inspires each one of us to discern what we are called to do in major and minor matters as we respond in love to God's call.
- We believe that we are called to respect and care for creation, to contribute to its evolution towards its God-ordained destiny, and to challenge policies and lifestyles that imperil its future and ours.
- We believe that God answers our prayers and that our prayers can contribute to the development of human society and to the evolution of creation.