

Explaining the Mass

With Fr. Mark Bentz, STL

Part 7: Liturgy of the Word, part 3

We are now at the Creed. Many books have been written on the subject, so we will only scratch the surface. To understand what the Creed is, let's look at the meaning of the word. *Credo* in Latin means "I believe". The Greek word for Creed is *Symbolon* (like symbol in English). A *Symbolon* was used in the ancient world to ensure that a messenger really was carrying an authentic message and could be trusted. How it worked was that the *Symbolon* was an object, usually a medallion, which was broken in half. To use an example, one half would be held by the king, and the other half would be held by his general in battle. If the king had a message to deliver to his general that was especially sensitive, the king would send a messenger with his half of the *Symbolon*. When the messenger arrived, he would give his half to the general to prove that the pieces 'fit' and his message was true.

This is similar to how creeds work today: they identify if you are on the 'same side', if you believe the same thing, if your 'witness' as a Christian can be trusted. Creeds have always been important since the earliest days of Christianity as succinct definitions of what we believe so that the faith could be handed on easily and teachers of the faith could prove their orthodoxy. The Apostles creed is one of the oldest formulations of faith and the Nicene Creed that we use at mass has been held by the universal church since the council of Constantinople in 381. When we recite the creed together, we are professing that we are 'on the same team', members of the same family of faith, the Catholic (which means universal) Church.

Many people claim to be Christian today, but at the same time they might practice Hinduism or Wicca or other new age practices which deny that Jesus is the only Son of God or the only Savior. Others might say that Jesus is a nice man or teacher, but not God! However, just as the pieces of the *Symbolon* must fit together to guarantee authenticity, so must a person's belief match up with the teachings of Jesus and His Church. If a person denies any aspect of the creed, they cannot be considered Christians, much less a part of the universal Church that Christ founded.

Why is that? Well, at the sacrament of Baptism, there are two things that happen before being baptized—we must "repent, and believe in the Gospel" as Jesus commanded. We 'repent' by a renunciation of Satan, and all his works, and all his empty promises. After repenting, we make a profession of faith in Jesus Christ and his Church by reciting the Creed before the priest and the congregation. If you were baptized as a baby, your parents did this on your behalf, but with the understanding that they would help you to embrace the teachings of the faith for yourself as you grew older—their faith substituted for yours when you were an infant. The creed, then, is the sign that you have accepted Jesus. If someone asks you, "What do Catholics believe?" the Creed is the most fundamental response and proclamation of the Gospel you can give them! Every time we recite the Creed, we are reminding ourselves of our Baptismal promises and the faith that we received on that day!

For your homework, I would suggest going to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and browsing through the first section. The whole first part of the *Catechism* explains the Creed line by line in great detail. If you don't have a *Catechism* in your home, order a copy! It is a resource book that should be on your shelf right next to the family bible. If certain passages are too dense, there is also a youth Catechism for teens (called *YouCat*) and the *Compendium to the Catechism*, which is a summary of the main points. The index of the Catechism will help you find the answer to almost any question you have about the Catholic faith. It is truly a remarkable book.

Lastly, we come to the Prayer of the Faithful. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* says: "In the Universal Prayer or Prayer of the Faithful, the people respond...to the Word of God which they have received in faith and, exercising the office of their baptismal Priesthood, offer prayers to God for the salvation of all...The series of intentions is usually to be: a) for the needs of the Church; b) for public authorities and the salvation of the whole world; c) for those burdened by any kind of difficulty; d) for the local community... The intentions announced should be sober, be composed with a wise liberty and in few words, and they should be expressive of the prayer of the entire community."¹

With this in mind, the Church reminds us that the prayers of the faithful aren't designed to be personal intentions or 'public service announcements' or even 'mini-homilies', but *very general* and expressing the faith of the whole Church, not just one person. We should pray for people's individual needs, but the prayers of the faithful at mass can't become one person's soapbox. With that said, the Liturgy of the Word is complete, and next week we'll look at the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

¹ GIRM 69-71