

THE APOSTLES CREED

Session 5

I. “THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH”

A. People sometimes talk about “organized religion” as if there was another kind of “religion” that is simply private (“unorganized religion”). This way of speaking is a product of modernity and completely foreign to the New Testament (and to the ancient world). The New Testament does not understand itself to be talking about a “religion” (of either the “organized” or “unorganized” variety). The New Testament understands itself to be talking about God’s covenant people Israel brought to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. To be a Jew or a Christian is not merely to have a “religion” but to enter into a covenant with God.

B. The Holy Spirit comes upon the Church at Pentecost, in fulfillment of Joel 2:28-32, not to enable individuals to “get religion” but to constitute the Church as the New Israel and to empower her to be a witness in the world. As Paul makes clear, the Holy Spirit is given to the Church to build up the Church as the Body of Christ. The Spirit gives his gifts to people not for their own benefit but for the “common good” (1 Corinthians 12:4-11).

C. The whole concept of the Church only becomes comprehensible if we grasp two premises:

1. God created human beings as essentially social creatures. Human society begins with the society of man and woman in marriage in Genesis 2:18-25, a society fractured by sin. This means that sin is never simply a matter of our individual sin but always involves the sin of the community and culture in which we live. Because we are essentially social creatures, our salvation must involve our social relationships. The Church is both a sign of the salvation that God will bring to humankind and part of God’s plan of salvation.
2. The purpose of becoming a Christian is not to find “spiritual fulfillment” or to “become a better person” but to bear witness to God’s saving work. It is important to recognize that knowing and loving God are not a means to something else but are the very purpose for which we were created.

D. We will fail to understand what the Church is if we simply attempt to understand it sociologically (as “organized religion”). In order to truly understand the Church, we have to understand it theologically because ultimately the Church is a creation of God. The Church is not primarily a building, an institution or even the sum total of all Christians now alive. “The Church is the whole community of faithful Christians in heaven and on earth. The Church on earth gathers in local congregations to worship in Word and Sacrament, to serve God according to the Scriptures, and to proclaim the Gospel, under the leadership of those whom God appoints for this purpose” (TBC, 89).

E. The Church is a multi-dimensional reality and this is reflected in the images that the New Testament uses to designate it, each of which tells us something about the reality of the Church:

1. The “household of faith” (Galatians 6:10): This image suggests that the Church is God’s extended family. We are to think of the Church not primarily as an organization or an institution but as a family. The Church is God’s newly created family, a family not based on blood relations but based on faith.
2. The “body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12): This image suggests that the Church is like a body. While it is composed of many parts, these are organically related. This body is made an organic whole and is animated and enlivened by Christ who is the Head (Ephesians 4:15). The Church has no other source of life than

Christ.

3. A “holy temple in the Lord” (Ephesians 2:21): In the Old Testament, the temple in Jerusalem was God’s visible dwelling place on earth. By speaking of the Church as God’s temple we are saying that the Church is fundamentally constituted by God’s dwelling with us and by his binding the Church to himself in covenant. To think of the Church as temple is to begin to realize why holiness is such an important dimension of the Christian life. The temple in Jerusalem was consecrated as a holy space because God dwelt there. Because the Church is a living temple, her life should be characterized by holiness.
 4. The “Bride of Christ” (Revelation 19:6-10): In Isaiah 62:1-5 God promises to transform Israel from an unfaithful wife into a beautiful and faithful wife. This transformation will involve the complete fulfillment of Israel. In Revelation 19:6-10 the Church appears as a bride clothed in “fine linen, bright and pure”. In other words, the Church is Israel fulfilled and united to Christ. As Christ’s Bride, we recognize that only Christ can bring the Church to fulfillment. Until this takes place, the Church will be incomplete and “under construction”.
- F. The New Testament uses many other images for the Church beside these four. Taken together, all these images remind us that the Church is fundamentally a creation of God, that the Church is sustained by God and that the Church exists for God’s purposes.

II. “THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS”

- A. Referring to the Church as the “communion of saints” may strike some as pretentious and others as simply absurd. What does this phrase mean? Paul refers to the Christians at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:2) as “saints” not because he thinks that all of them have attained perfect sanctity, but because they have been “sanctified in Christ Jesus” and so “called to be saints”. Because God in Christ has freed us from the bondage of sin and now sanctifies us through the work of the Holy Spirit, it is possible for us to become saints.
- B. The Church is a community of people but it is also communion with the Triune God. The closeness of our communion with God mirrors the communion of the Father and the Son (John 17:20-22). By being united to the Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are also drawn into communion with one another.
- C. In speaking of the communion of saints we are reminded that we are not simply saved as individuals but we are saved as part of a community and that part of salvation is the reconstitution of the human community. Through Christ, the sinful divisions among people are overcome and we are reconciled to God “in one body through the cross” (Ephesians 2:16).

III. SIGNS WHEREBY WE RECEIVE GOD’S GRACE: THE SACRAMENTS

- A. The sacraments are visible signs of Christ’s presence and activity in the Church. As such they attest to the fact that the Church is sustained only by Christ who continues to work within her (through the Holy Spirit and by virtue of his ascension). All the sacraments come from Christ and they are means by which he builds up the Church as his Body.
- B. A sacrament is not simply a ritual or symbolic action. A sacrament may be defined as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace”. The sacraments come with God’s assurance that through them we receive his grace.
- C. Holy Baptism: Baptism is the most basic of all the sacraments in that this sacrament initiates us into the Christian life and so is the doorway to all the other sacraments. Baptism both initiates a person into the Body of Christ and portrays the fundamental nature of the Christian life. Baptism makes possible a whole new pattern of life involving our gradual death to sin and our gradual rebirth in righteousness. When a person is baptized, they

are not “saved” but, rather, initiated into a life of repentance and growth in holiness that will, if followed, lead to salvation.

D. Holy Eucharist: In the Eucharist, the Church’s central act of worship, we simultaneously proclaim the atoning death of Jesus Christ (I Corinthians II:26) and enter into communion with him so as to receive the benefits of his sacrifice (I Corinthians IO:I6-2I). The Eucharist is simultaneously the sacrament of Christ’s death and resurrection and the means by which we receive the fruits of Christ’s death and resurrection. In receiving the Eucharist we are more firmly united to Christ, strengthened in the gifts of faith, hope and love and cleansed from sin.

E. Baptism and the Eucharist are considered the “sacraments of the Gospel” (TBC, IO4). In addition to these two sacraments there are five others. The phrase “sacraments of the Gospel” is applied to Baptism and Eucharist because these two were “ordained by Christ” and are “generally necessary for salvation” (TBC, IO4).

F. Confirmation: Confirmation is a sacrament related to Baptism. In this sacrament, a person makes a “mature commitment” to the baptismal covenant (the faith set forth by the Apostles’ Creed) that was made on their behalf when they were baptized (if baptized as an infant or child) and receives the laying of hands by a bishop (Acts 8:I4-I7) and prayer that they might be strengthened in their baptism. Confirmation involves a public and mature commitment to the Faith as well as the grace to persist in this commitment.

G. Absolution (Reconciliation): In this sacrament a person makes a confession of sin to God in the presence of a priest and the priest both offers counsel and pronounces forgiveness in the name of Christ (John 20:22-23). In this sacrament, we live out our baptismal promise to resist evil and to continuously repent of our sin and turn to the Lord.

H. Ordination: Through the sacrament of ordination a person is consecrated, authorized and empowered to serve Christ in the Church through the ministry of Word and Sacrament (TBC, I22). By definition, this sacrament, like Confirmation, involves the laying on of hands by a bishop. Through this action, the ordained person receives grace from the Holy Spirit to carry out ministry in the Church on behalf of Christ.

I. Marriage: Marriage is the sacrament which involves “a life-long covenant between a man and a woman, binding both to self-giving love and exclusive fidelity” (TBC, I28). Marriage is the sacrament of the graced relationship of husband and wife and is a sign of Christ’s self-sacrificial love for the Church (Ephesians 5:25-27). Marriage has been ordered by God to three ends or goods: the procreation of children, mutual joy, and the help and comfort given in times of prosperity and adversity.

J. Anointing of the Sick (Unction): In this sacrament a person is anointed with consecrated oil in the Name of the Triune God. The purpose of this sacrament is to bring God’s blessing of healing on those suffering in body, mind or spirit (James 5:I4-I6; TBC, I32).

K. It is important to remember two things about the sacraments. First, all of the sacraments have their origin in Jesus’ Passion and communicate to us some fruit of his Passion. Second, all of the sacraments prefigure some dimension of our salvation. Salvation involves our perfect cleansing (Baptism, Absolution), our perfect healing (unction), our perfect union with Christ (Eucharist), our perfect union with Christ and his people (Marriage) and our perfect faithfulness (Confirmation).

