

ENTERING THE CITY:

THE Twelve Gates OF THE Apostles' Creed

'And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of the Lamb is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light shall the nations walk; and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it, and its gates shall never be shut by day – and there shall be no night there...'

Rev. 21:23-5

In this article Stratford Caldecott explores the faith by which we enter the twelve-gated City of Revelation, the faith that is the beginning of that Light by which we will see what the City contains, and above all the Lamb enthroned at its centre.

The Creed of the Twelve

The first official summary (or 'symbol,' as it was called) of the Christian faith was a simple affirmation: *Jesus is Lord*. We find this in the Gospels and the Letters of Saint Paul. What we know as the Apostles' Creed is a slightly later summary, enabling Christians to affirm not only their faith in Christ, but some of the main implications of that faith. Most Christians are also familiar with the so-called Creed of Nicaea, which is later and more elaborate still, being designed to refute the various Christological heresies (i.e. mistakes about the nature of Christ) that had arisen in the early centuries of faith.

A Creed is more than a summary of faith, of what is to be believed. Like Scripture, it has a liturgical character. To recite it in the context of the liturgy is a ritual action, a celebration that aligns us with its divine source, making us receptive to grace. As Martin Mossback puts it, the Creed 'considered as a liturgical prayer, is not a collection of dogmas that were defined at various councils (and some of which were imposed by main force) but a means whereby the individual plunges once again into the purifying freshness of baptism, the presence of the communion of saints, the Church-creating power of the Holy Trinity.'¹

Nevertheless, it is also, in fact, made up of dogmas. It would hardly possess a 'Church-creating power' if it did not represent the truths at the heart of the Christian faith, from which the Church herself springs. But the word 'collection' suggests a more-or-less arbitrary heap of propositions, whereas the nature of a Creed is that of a portrait, or a piece of music; in other words, it has an extraordinarily intense unity. The various words and phrases are indispensable elements in a living whole that reflects the structure and life of the Church as a whole – as I hope to show in what follows.

There is an ancient legend, described by Henri de Lubac SJ in his book *The Catholic Faith*, that the Apostle's Creed was drawn up by the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ under direct inspiration from God, each of them contributing one of the twelve sections. De Lubac regards this division into precisely twelve parts as rather forced, though less so than the division into two sets of *seven* favoured by both Saint Thomas Aquinas and Saint Bonaventure (the first set of three listing the mysteries of the divine Trinity, the second of four the mysteries of the divine humanity of Christ). In fact, despite the high repute of both these great saints, and despite the acknowledged importance of the number seven as a structural principle in Catholicism, the Catholic tradition as a whole did not follow them in this. In the case of the Creed, a twelvefold division was felt to be more faithful to the more ancient texts and more convenient for memory.

The Apostles' Creed may be translated as follows. Numbers, emphasis, and indentation have been introduced to accentuate its underlying Trinitarian structure.

1. I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth,
2. And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
 3. Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,
 4. Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried;
 5. He descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead,
 6. He ascended into heaven; is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty;
 7. From thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.
8. I believe in the Holy Spirit,
 9. The Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints,
 10. The forgiveness of sins,
 11. The resurrection of the body;
 12. And life everlasting.

The Trinitarian structure of the Creed is plain, but it can be made still plainer if we display it as follows, placing all the sections after the first into two unequal columns:

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|---|---|
| 1. I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth, | |
| 2. And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, | |
| 3. Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, | 8. I believe in the Holy Spirit, |
| 4. Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; | 9. The Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, |
| 5. He descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead, | 10. The forgiveness of sins, |
| 6. He ascended into heaven; is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty; | 11. The resurrection of the body, |
| 7. From thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead. | 12. And life everlasting. |

The point of dividing it into two columns in this way is to emphasize the fact that, after the second clause introducing the Second Person of the Trinity, there are five clauses that expand upon the work of the Son in the world. Only then is the Holy Spirit formally introduced as an object of faith (in clause 8) – but this and the four clauses that follow (which all concern the work of the Holy Spirit) ‘shadow’ the five clauses referring to the work of the Son’s incarnation, as I show below. You could say they unpack the Creed’s first mention of the Spirit, which is to be found in clause 3, there dealing with the Son’s conception and birth.

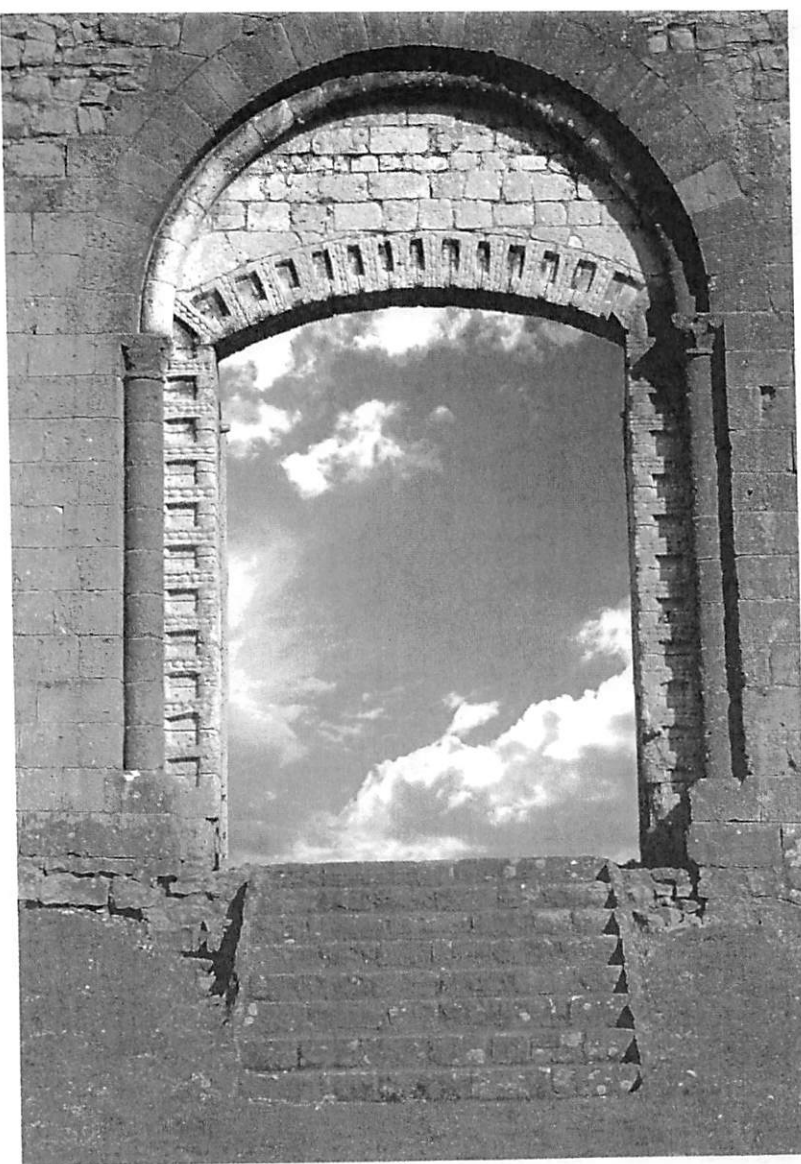
The shape of the Creed is therefore extremely elegant. But this method of analysis also helps to reveal the Creed’s theological structure, for three important facts about the Trinity and our knowledge of the Persons are shown by it.

First, it shows that the work of the Holy Spirit is indissolubly linked to the Incarnation at every stage. The Son reveals the Spirit, and the Spirit the Son. The Holy Spirit makes his first appearance in the Creed as conceiving the Son within the womb of the Virgin Mary. The Spirit is revealed by his role in the Incarnation.

Second, we also learn something important about the Virgin Mary right away, namely her intimate relationship with the Holy Spirit. (Normally she is termed the ‘spouse’ of the Spirit, but at least one saint – Maximilian Kolbe, one of the saints of Auschwitz – went so far as to call her the Spirit’s ‘quasi-incarnation.’)

Third, if each of the ‘Spirit clauses’ is to be read against one of the ‘Son clauses,’ the Creed can assist us in understanding the work of the Spirit in relation to specific aspects of the Son’s mission on earth, as follows.

- His suffering, crucifixion, death, and burial are directly connected with the establishment of the Church, the communion of saints (4/9).
- His descent into hell and rising from death are directly connected with the forgiveness of sins (5/10).
- His ascension to the right hand of the Father is directly connected with our own resurrection on the last day (6/11).



- His second coming and final judgment are directly connected with our own everlasting life (7/12).

Together, these four points give us the main threads that run through the mission of the Son on earth, which are the very reasons for his incarnation.

Clauses 4 and 9 refer to the burial of Jesus and establishment of the Church. The Incarnation bears fruit. Others, beginning with Jesus’ immediate family and first disciples, begin to live with the Spirit of Jesus Christ within them, and in this way the Church is born. It is born specifically in and through Baptism, which is a way of dying with Christ, a process of being ‘buried’ with him in the sacramental waters (according to Romans 6:3-4).

Clauses 5 and 10 refer to the descent into hell, resurrection, and forgiveness of sins. The sin of Adam that initiated the Fall, together with all the personal sins that have contributed ever since to our alienation from the Creator, are the *felix culpa* (‘happy fault’)³ that occasioned the Incarnation. Forgiveness, and liberation from the state of slavery to sin, is what Jesus came to give us. In order to accomplish it, though, he must first descend into the state of death to which sin has brought us. This is the mystery about which the mystic Adrienne von Speyr wrote so profoundly, the mystery of Holy Saturday, at the heart of the sacrament of Reconciliation. In this sacrament we can experience the turning from death to life.

Clauses 6 and 11 refer to the ascension of Jesus and our raising from the dead. After Jesus rose from the dead he was, for a time, still upon the earth, but at the Ascension forty days later his earthly existence was taken up and reintegrated with the eternal life he possessed with the Father in heaven. Our own resurrection will not be into a second earthly life, but into a new state we cannot now imagine. ‘It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body’ and ‘as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven’ (1 Cor. 15:44, 48, RSV).

Clauses 7 and 12 refer to Jesus' second coming and the granting of everlasting life. When we are raised, there is one further stage we must go through, and it is the judgment. The Book of Revelation ends with the words, 'Come, Lord Jesus!' This is the consummation, the fulfilment to which the saints look forward. Through judgment comes the final human state, the state that the Church Fathers called thesis or divinization, which is what the theologians call the Beatific Vision, the vision of God 'face to face,' and which is the real meaning of the phrase 'everlasting life.'

Thus we see in the few lines of the Apostles' Creed a masterpiece of summation, condensing a whole world of theology into a few bold strokes.

Passing Through the Creed

Perhaps the point of the ancient legend concerning the Apostolic origin of the twelve parts is not only that the Creed truly expresses the original *kerygma* or saving message of the Gospels, but that each separate part is equivalent to one of the foundations of the Liturgical City of John's Revelation on Patmos. The city wall has twelve foundations inscribed with the names of the Apostles, and above each foundation a gate inscribed with one of the Tribes. The parts of the Creed are like the foundations on which the faith of the City is built. That is, they are the deepest parts of the wall that defines the space and shape of the city, protecting it against all possible enemies. And above each foundation is a gate, a way into the City. Thus the walls are both impregnable and permeable, for we enter easily by the act of faith. Yet each wall, each foundation of the wall and each gate within it, does not stand alone but is an element in the whole, and to enter through one gate is to be inside them all, within the space that each protects and helps to define.

There is another dimension that can be brought in here, although it will necessitate anticipating slightly the final chapter where I speak about the City as Bride. The City, as John sees her, is feminine. She is not a *thing* but a theological *person*: Ecclesia, Maria. If Mary herself is in some way embodied in this image, we need not find it too strange if, when we meditate upon the mysteries of her life as presented in Scripture, we discover a twelvefold structure in these mysteries as well. She, too, has twelve gates or facets, just as the faith of the Apostles has twelve. At any rate, this is what Hans Urs von Balthasar finds when he reflects on the mystery of Mary in his *Theo-Drama*.³

Twelve such mysteries can be enumerated (though they can be subdivided): (1) Annunciation (Lk 1); (2) Pregnancy (Joseph's suspicion in Matt. 1); (3) Visitation of Elizabeth and John the Baptist, the Magnificat; (4) Nativity; (5) Presentation in the Temple; (6) Flight; (7) Finding of the Child in the Temple; (8) Cana; (9) Dismissal of his Mother and brothers; (10) 'Blessed are those who believe'; (11) At the foot of the Cross; (12) At prayer together with the Church (Acts 1). These individual scenes are like stars: they demand to be seen as a constellation, and they become brighter and deeper the closer they are brought together. The effect is often surprising: thus the 'sword' prophecy in Luke clearly points to the scene at the Cross in John; and the 'Spirit' and the 'power of the Most High' that comes upon Mary in Luke 1:35 points to the 'Spirit' and the 'power from on high' that comes upon the Church in Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:8.

Thus, when the Church meditates upon the faith, whether in relation to Jesus or in relation to Mary, twelve facets seem to present themselves, twelve gates through which our minds can travel into the City that lies behind them. It is as though the nature of the faith demanded it.

So let us for a moment do what Balthasar suggests and bring these stars together. What happens if I juxtapose the twelve phrases of the Apostles' Creed with his twelve Marian mysteries?

No doubt practically any comparison of mysteries one with another would shed light on both, but let us see what the following conjunctions reveal to the eyes of faith, and in this way how the Creed can be our gateway to a deeper understanding of Holy Scripture. This is how I read the connections between the two sets of mysteries:

■ I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth

Annunciation

The annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary that the great promise of God would be fulfilled through her, was accepted by her as an act of faith in 'God the Father almighty,' the Father of her people. It was the greatest such act of faith that had ever been made, and the purest.

■ And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord

Pregnancy and Joseph's suspicion

The result of Mary's act of faith was the conception of Jesus himself within her womb. He entered, Saint Augustine tells us, 'through her ear' (in the sense that she conceived not in the way of fallen humanity but by accepting the Word that had been spoken to her). Whether Joseph suspected her of adultery or not is unknown; that he was nonplussed and puzzled is without doubt, since it would not have been clear to him what part he could possibly play in this mystery of God's Son until the Angel told him that he must become the legal father of the boy, in order to graft him into the stock of Israel and of David, and to protect both Mother and Child.

■ Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary

Visitation of Elizabeth and John the Baptist

In the Gospels the pregnancy of Mary's old cousin Elizabeth and Mary's own are intertwined, as are the destinies of their two sons. Mary is informed of Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy during the Annunciation itself, but she travels to visit her cousin not to confirm the message of the Angel but to help in the birth of John, just as Jesus will travel to John in the wilderness so that John can assist in the 'birth' of his ministry through baptism in the Jordan River.

■ Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried

Nativity – the mystery of the Incarnation

Here our juxtaposition of mysteries reminds us that Christmas and Easter, birth and death, are two sides of the same coin, and especially so in the case of Jesus, whose birth into the world as a man separate and distinct from all others is for a purpose that is only fulfilled in his death for sin, in which he draws all men to himself and becomes the second Adam.

■ He descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead

Presentation in the Temple

What is the connection between the Presentation, the descent into hell and the rising from the dead? Jesus is brought by his parents to the Temple for the normal rites of purification after a birth. They meet the old prophet, Simeon, and the prophetess, Anna, who see in the Child the redemption of Israel, and Mary is told 'a sword shall pierce through your own soul also' (Luke 2:35). That sword is the death of her Son, and his resurrection is the salvation that is promised at the same time.

■ He ascended into heaven; is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty

Flight into Egypt

Ascension into heaven is not a flight from the earth: that would be too easy. But we can see a strange inversion here. In the Ascension Jesus is welcomed by his heavenly Father and given his eternal throne; on earth, far from offering him a throne, the king tries to kill him and Joseph has to take him into concealment far from home. Yet in the eyes of heaven abasement is the same as glory.

■ **From thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead**
Finding of the Child in the Temple

Mary and Joseph do not find him hiding in the Temple, but 'sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers' (Luke 2:46-7). Icons show him holding court, as it were – an anticipation of the role he will fulfil at the Last Judgment, when the fate of our souls will be defined by the answer to such questions as these: 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?' (Matthew 25:31-46.)

■ **I believe in the Holy Spirit**

Cana – the turning of water into wine

Mary, docile Spouse of the Holy Spirit and Giver of Life, now directs the Fruit of her womb to manifest that same Spirit at the wedding feast of Cana. In similar obedience, Jesus calls down the Holy Spirit to change the water into wine. We the Church witness this power of the Holy Spirit during the *epiclesis* of every Mass; whereby the priest, following Jesus' command, calls down the Holy Spirit upon the gifts of bread and wine to make Jesus present in his Body and Blood, without which we cannot participate in the Eternal Banquet.

■ **The Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints**

Dismissal of his Mother and brothers

When someone in the crowd tells Jesus that his Mother and cousins are calling him from outside the house, he replies, looking at those sitting with him, 'Here are my mother and my brethren! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother' (Mark 3:31-5). In other words, he defines the nature of the Catholic Church and the communion of saints. It is made up of all who have become his family through the gift of the Holy Spirit and their acceptance of it. His mother does not need to come in, and he does not need to depart, for she is already there.

■ **The forgiveness of sins**

'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it' (This sentence of Jesus from Luke 11:28 is rendered by Balthasar in an alternative translation, 'Blessed are those who believe.')

Jesus is replying to a woman in the crowd who cries out, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked.' Mary knows, of course, that she is eternally blessed, so this is hardly intended as a rebuke directed at her. She is the first of those who heard the word of God and kept it, as the same Gospel tells us. Forgiveness of sins is only possible because of this hearing and keeping, this receiving of the word that is the incarnation of the Father's mercy. Sacramental absolution restores us to this state of 'blessedness'.

■ **The resurrection of the body**

At the foot of the Cross


John tells us that he receives Mary into his home, as his own spiritual Mother, from the moment that Jesus tells him 'Behold, your mother!' (John 19:27.) With that, Jesus knows that all is completed. Mysteriously, Jesus on the Cross has given birth, like a mother, to the Church, in the form of the communion of John and Mary. He has made Mary the mother of John and of all disciples, so that as his body dies, its rebirth from the tomb is already anticipated by the birth of the Church.

■ **And life everlasting**

At prayer together with the Church – Pentecost

The life everlasting is the life of the indwelling Holy Spirit who descends on us at Pentecost like tongues of fire, when Mary is at prayer with the disciples (Acts 1:14, 2:1-4).



The Creed is not an end in itself. We are intended to pass through it, into the faith of the Church. The Marian mysteries express that faith, too, from a different 'angle'. The twelve facets of the Faith, like the gates of pearl, lead into the same space, the same City in which 'death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away' (Rev. 21:4). 

Notes

1. M. Mosebach, *The Heresy of Formlessness*, 90.
2. Of the four Evangelists, only Matthew and John are counted as Apostles – if indeed they were the actual authors of the Gospels named after them, which is disputed by some. Mark is held to have derived most of his material from Saint Peter, while Luke was a companion and friend of Saint Paul the 'super-Apostle' to the Gentiles, and may have added material he obtained directly from the Virgin Mary concerning the Annunciation and Nativity.
3. *Theo-Drama*, Vol. III, 229 fn.

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