

## Chapter xviii: *Why the Creed?*

**A**LL FAMILIES HAVE FAMILY FLAWS, the dark side to their good points. Families that are talkative and lively are also inclined to have rows; families that are closely-knit are often inhospitable to strangers; artistic families are disorganised. These family characteristics are often different from the good and bad qualities of any individual within those families. Brad Jones may happen to have a mind like a bear-trap, in fact he may be an accountant; but the Joneses are still notoriously unpunctual, and if you invite the Brad Joneses to lunch on Thanksgiving the cranberry sauce burns while you wait. Margaret Smith is perhaps as sweet and vague as a kitten, but the Smiths are half Irish and ferociously eloquent when drunk; when Meg meets her brothers she miscalculates the whiskey and reverts to type. Families have a corporate personality, and this personality is often more important than the temperament of each family member.

### **What the Church is like – alas.**

**T**HE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IS NOT an organisation, nor merely a huddle of individuals: she is a Body, a unity, a personality. She is known as the Bride of Christ, which is to say that she is the form humanity takes, and will eternally take, in order to be married to God the Son. She is divine, because she has married into the Trinity (if I may put it so jauntily). She is eternal, in the literal sense that when time and space are gone, there will still be a endless dinner party going on, and this dinner party will be known as ‘the Church’, and will even resemble what we now call ‘the Church.’

But in the meantime the eternal, divine Church is also human, and therefore apt to declines and meanderings. She is a human, and therefore fallible, family: a huge family, encompassing every race in almost every age, but familial, and therefore fallible, and fallible in predictable ways.

Christians squabble. That is one of our family flaws, one of our corporate characteristics. Although there have always been plenty of Christians who were too easy-going, or vague, or conciliatory, or other-worldly, or simple, or insecure, or troubled, to care about the doctrinal details of their belief, they (like Aunt Meg and Uncle Brad) get swept up in what the greatest of all popular theologians calls – as we'll see in a few pages – *monstrous wars about small points of theology, earthquakes of emotion about a gesture or a word.*

We are a family that has always been apt to appalling fights over apparently trifling points of Church dogma, ceremonial, or organisation – particularly dogma. Sometimes these points really are trifling; sometimes they are not. There's no good sneering at all these squabbles, in the present or the past, and asserting that they can't have mattered, that they were only spats about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, or that's there isn't or wasn't an *iota* of a difference' between the contested positions. Sometimes that interpolated *iota* can be perfectly deadly, like a little needle in the heart – as we'll see next week. The fight to prise out that *iota* might seem, from a distance of centuries, laughable; but it did matter then – and it even matters now. If that fight had not ended with victory of the one true faith over error (and these terms are not ridiculous just because they're often jeered at), then we would be trying to shelter in a ruined Church even now.

The Church lives very precariously. She lives by fighting.

I say that bad family characteristics are the dark side of good qualities, and that (human nature being unstable) you can't have the good without the bad. The great good of Christianity – apart from its *truth* – is its elation. God has showed Himself to us in the most tangible possible way, as a Man visible, embraceable, pierceable. He has granted us intimate access to truth: the truth about God is palpable.

It is also easy to misunderstand, for the data are overwhelming and complex. But we have to try to understand. The quarrelsomeness that follows is the dark side of our elation. Individual Christians feel the elated thrill of immediate understanding of the divine action of Christ. But individual Christians are frequently mistaken. From their conflict the corporate Church emerges, eventually, more subtly and deeply informed than she has ever before. From evil emerges good. But the process is messy, and scandalous while it lasts.

We have to *endure* the insult that Christianity is far more quarrelsome than Hinduism, more quarrelsome than Judaism, even more quarrelsome

than Islam, because the insult is true. Squabbles are our family's bad characteristic.

We're about to see what the Mass does about it.

### **From the Gospel to the Creed.**

**I**N THIS LONG, CAREFUL PILGRIMAGE through the rites of Mass, we reached last week the chanting of the Gospel. Our frozen instant in the Mass showed the eight men of the Gospel procession striking a pose deep into the nave. They have carried the Gospel book there with every possible solemnity and mark of grave joy. Now, as the deacon sings out the words of the Gospel, cross, candles and thurible sink about him, so that nothing distracts from this climax.

The words are completed.

Then, after the Gospel is done, there is a glad final flourish. The organ thunders away triumphantly, even in this Lenten season. The subdeacon, holding the book triumphantly open and above his head, strides back into the sanctuary, where the celebrant has been watching the reading, alone and ignored. For the last few minutes our attention has turned so intently on hearing the life of Christ that we have forgotten, and even turned our backs on, the altar. Now, as the subdeacon goes past with the book (we follow it with our eyes), and the rest of the procession trails back after him (we bow to the passing cross), we remember the altar and the celebrant and the coming sacrifice. The subdeacon is presenting him with the open book, and he kisses it at the point where the words of today's Gospel begins (murmuring *Per evangelica dicta deleantur nostra delicta, By the words of the Gospel may our sins be blotted out*: a profound murmur, worth pause; but we haven't time for a pause).. The subdeacon stands to the side, holding the splendid book, shut now. Meanwhil, the pavement has filled up with stragglers from the procession – except that Mass is the time of perfect reason and order, and no one ever *straggles*. They are lined up on the 'pavement' with for the deacon, for they know what he has in mind. He has spied the celebrant again, and, after this dramatic westward excursion down the nave, needs to re-orientate our devotion back to the east, the altar, the imminent sacrament. So the deacon takes the censer from its officer, and for the second time in the Mass solemnly reverences the celebrant, stately on the heights of the altar steps, with smoke: *clink-clink; clink-clink; clink-clink*. The celebrant bows to acknowledge this courtesy; the deacon bows back in homage; the celebrant turns back toward God's altar. The thurible is handed off and borne out into the sacristy, invisible. The subdeacon takes the gospel

book back to its place – in this church, a small convenient shelf on the sanctuary wall, where it sits, propped up, until it is needed for next week's Epistle. The rest of the servers disperse and vanish with dignity in various directions.

The high glory of the Gospel reading has been dissipated with seemly pomp. Now what?

### **What should come after the Gospel?**

**W**E HAVE HAD AS MUCH as we can digest of the words of the Bible: three good-sized doses. How are we to digest them?

There are a number of ways forward. We could all fall to a vehement silence of half an hour, pondering what we have heard. But the Christian impulse is towards shared and cumulative reflection on the Bible, not private brooding. We should in some way talk about what we have heard. But the Christian impulse is not for disorderly chatter, but for comfortable and friendly hierarchy, in conversation as in everything else. The talking should be done *for* us, by someone honed and prepared for the task. Well then, if she dared, the Church would at this point in her ritual lay aside ritual, and take up rhetoric instead. If she dared tolerate anything so free, we would now have someone – someone set aside and trained for the task – begin a well-regulated, unliturgical palaver about what we have just read and chanted in the liturgy.

And the Church does dare to be that free. She prescribes a sermon after the Gospel. She lets Christian truth, always unexhausted, be set forth, every Sunday in every church, in words that have never been used for it before. She allows the exultant freshness of the Church's belief to run over, for it is our family characteristic to find more words to utter about the words of the Gospel every time we hear it.

Ah, but this thought of family characteristics is a warning. We know what we are like as a family: we squabble and fray, we let elation carry us off to extremes and distortions.

So what is to be done to order and channel the elation that bursts forth after the Gospel reading?

The answer (not absolutely a happy answer, and accepted reluctantly) is that we should say over together a doctrinal formula, sketching the boundaries of our belief, after the Gospel, but before we move on to the expansiveness of the sermon.

Rehearsing such a formula may sound a bit chilling. It is: Christians have minds so churned up by the Gospel that they need to be a bit chilled.

## What is the Creed like?

**W**E HAVE NOW, THEREFORE, COME TO THE CHILLING POINT (or freeze-frame) in the Mass known as the [Credo](#) or [Creed](#): a thing of glory and a mark of shame.

As always, the bizarre variation on High, normal celebrations of Mass, the variation known as Low Mass, is a useful thing to contemplate. For Low Mass shows what is and isn't essential, much as modern dress and scenery-free productions of Shakespeare show what can be left out without the play collapsing. The minimum of Low Mass does not, as it happens, require either Creed or sermon. They are not essential elements to valid celebration of Mass.

But the stark minimalism of Low Mass is the exception. At this point it is natural both for truth to burst out in new directions – which is what the sermon is (or should be) like. And it is natural and necessary (given our family flaw) for truth first to be fixed again in ancient family wisdom. And that wisdom is walled in by the Creed.

Thus the Creed is both an exultant blare of trumpets, a tumble of exhilarated claims, a horde of splendid propositions; and a medicine which the Church has to keep giving herself every week, because she was sick nearly to death fifteen centuries ago and is always in danger of a relapse. The Creed is a celebration of truth set to music, but it is also [a castle wall](#), bristling with offensive weapons – rigged up with spouts, down which we pour boiling chrism onto besiegers – a wall equipped with immense cranes to drop boulders labelled PETRVS and ANATHEMA on attackers.

In other words, the Creed tries to protect the truth, not by positively defining and limiting it – for truth, especially truth about God, is too infinite and too subtle for that – but by [excluding error](#). The Creed does not tell us what we must think about God so much as rule out certain dangerously confused ways of thinking about God.

The Creed protects our liberty to explore and reinterpret the Faith by immuring the Faith from certain well-known heresies. The Creed is gloriously negative: it is designed to repel and keep out certainly fatally mistaken ideas.

That is surprising; and it takes some explaining. And the only way to explain what our Creed *is*, is to understand what it was designed to *do*, or in other words precisely what and whom it was designed to keep out. And the explanation has to be a sort of history, a history of theology, a chronicle of

how Christian truth was besieged, an involved reminiscence of our family story . . . .

And here the moody author of *The Freeze-Frame Mass* loses his nerve.

### **In anxious defence of what follows.**

**F**OR I KNOW HOW PEOPLE LOOK whenaced with ancient history – particularly in this relatively new and unstoried Republic, where *History is Bunk* (H. Ford), where the worst playground insult is: *You're history*. I'm aware of how dusty theological history, the history of ideas and controversies between bishops, is likely to appear.

So I despair of making this account of the formation of the Christian Creed exciting in itself, or even perfectly clear; for the story is long and convoluted and byzantine – and indeed Byzantine.

How am I to do it? How am I to make you sure that it is necessary to know why the Church needs to be defended by precisely *this* castle wall which she has erected around herself? How can I make you want to hear how this wall was built, and why it is quite the shape that it is?

Well, frankly I can't. But my individual despair hardly matters. In the Church, one's private weaknesses are deluged with the strength of others. I despair at explaining why the story of Christian dogma needs to be explained. But I am only despairing of myself; there is always CHESTERTON.

The blessed G.K. Chesterton(why is he not yet St. G.K. Chesterton?) could make anything sound thrilling. He demonstrated that the Creed really is a matter of thrill. I cannot improve on that wonderful, justly famous purple passage at the end of dazzling chapter VI ('The Romance of Orthodoxy') in his dazzling book *Orthodoxy*. So here it is.

You have read it before? Well, read it again now, and marvel.

### **Chesterton speaks.**

**C**HESTERTON, MY MASTER, is explaining how everything in Christianity is a matter, not of elemental purity, but rather of vigorous opposites and counterbalanced extremes:

Paganism had been like a pillar of marble, upright because proportioned with symmetry. Christianity was like a huge and ragged and romantic rock, which, though it sways on its pedestal at a touch, yet, because its exaggerated excrescences exactly balance each other, is enthroned there for a thousand years. In a

Gothic cathedral the columns were all different, but they were all necessary. Every support seemed an accidental and fantastic support; every buttress was a flying buttress.

This principle of dynamic balance, of the 'irregular equilibrium', is true in morality, for Christianity embraced both asceticism and celebration of the world:

Because a man prayed and fasted on the Northern snows, flowers could be flung at his festival in the Southern cities; and because fanatics drank water on the sands of Syria, men could still drink cider in the orchards of England. This is what makes Christendom at once so much more perplexing and so much more interesting than the Pagan empire; just as Amiens Cathedral is not better but more interesting than the Parthenon.

The same principle of dangerous balance applies to ('what is so inexplicable to all the modern critics of the history of Christianity',) the passionate and violent precision with which the Creeds were formulated:

the monstrous wars about small points of theology, the earthquakes of emotion about a gesture or a word. It was only a matter of an inch; but an inch is everything when you are balancing. The Church could not afford to swerve a hair's breadth on some things if she was to continue her great and daring experiment of the irregular equilibrium. Once let one idea become less powerful and some other idea would become too powerful. It was no flock of sheep the Christian shepherd was leading, but a herd of bulls and tigers, of terrible ideals and devouring doctrines, each one of them strong enough to turn to a false religion and lay waste the world.

Remember that the Church went in specifically for dangerous ideas; she was a lion tamer. The idea of birth through a Holy Spirit, of the death of a divine being, of the forgiveness of sins, or the fulfilment of prophecies, are ideas which, any one can see, need but a touch to turn them into something blasphemous or ferocious. The smallest link was let drop by the artificers of the Mediterranean, and the lion of ancestral pessimism burst his chain in the forgotten forests of the north .... [If] some small mistake were made in doctrine, huge blunders might be made in human happiness. A sentence phrased wrong about the nature of symbolism would have broken all the best statues in Europe. A slip in the definitions might stop all the dances; might wither all the Christmas trees or break all the Easter eggs. Doctrines had to

be defined within strict limits, even in order that man might enjoy general human liberties. The Church had to be careful, if only that the world might be careless.

This is the thrilling romance of Orthodoxy. People have fallen into a foolish habit of speaking of orthodoxy as something heavy, humdrum, and safe. There never was anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy. It was sanity: and to be sane is more dramatic than to be mad. It was the equilibrium of a man behind madly rushing horses, seeming to stoop this way and to sway that, yet in every attitude having the grace of statuary and the accuracy of arithmetic.

The Church in her early days went fierce and fast as any warhorse; yet it is utterly unhistoric to say that she merely went mad along one idea, like a vulgar fanaticism. She swerved to left and right, so exactly as to avoid enormous obstacles. She left on one hand the huge bulk of Arianism, buttressed by all the worldly powers to make Christianity too worldly. The next instant she was swerving to avoid an orientalism, which would have made it too unworldly.

The orthodox Church never took the tame course or accepted the conventions; the orthodox Church was never respectable. It would have been easier to have accepted the earthly power of the Arians. It would have been easy, in the Calvinistic seventeenth century, to fall into the bottomless pit of predestination. It is easy to be a madman: it is easy to be a heretic. It is always easy to let the age have its head; the difficult thing is to keep one's own. It is always easy to be a modernist; as it is easy to be a snob. To have fallen into any of those open traps of error and exaggeration which fashion after fashion and sect after sect set along the historic path of Christendom – that would indeed have been simple. It is always simple to fall; there are an infinity of angles at which one falls, only one at which one stands. To have fallen into any one of the fads from Gnosticism to Christian Science would indeed have been obvious and tame. But to have avoided them all has been one whirling adventure; and in my vision the heavenly chariot flies thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate, the wild truth reeling but erect.<sup>1</sup>

**That's all, folks.**

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<sup>1</sup> Downloaded from cyberspace; but the paragraphing is mine (Chesterton doesn't paragraph enough. It is his only fault).



SO MUCH FOR BLESSÈD Chesterton.

The wild chariot ride he is describing took place in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. That was the age of Creed-making and Creed-breaking and Creed-faking, the furious era when at one shout from a basilica mobs sprang up in the streets of Constantinople and Antioch and Alexandria like sudden tornadoes – when emperors rose and fell and were throttled – when peoples revolted, turrety cities were sacked, rich provinces were alienated forever – all over a technical word here or a metaphysical phrase there about the nature of Christ. ‘*Ὁμοιουσιον* or ‘*Ὁμουσιον*, *homoiousion* or *homousion*? Was Son of similar ‘substance’ with the Father – or of the same ‘substance’? Howl the wrong or right word in the bazaar, and at once the city would be aflame, and army of monks would be about you armed with torches and swords and precise terminology, crying ‘Anathema to the Monophysites!’, ‘Death to the Nestorian Chief Eunuch!’, ‘Confusion on the crypto-Tritheist Sebastocrator and his diabolic blasphemy of the Single Nature!’

This was the only age in the history of our civilisation when politics were about abstract ideas, and it has a certain charm for that reason alone. But as Chesterton showed us, the consequences of their getting the ideas wrong would have been immense; and I was explaining earlier in this chapter, the consequences of victory are still with us. Every Sunday at Mass we stand as a body, face God enthroned on His altar, and solemnly lodge with Him the fourth century formula of our understanding of Him. *Credo in unum Deum . . . et*, we declare: *I believe in one God, ... and*; and there’s a good deal more after that *and*. We gravely swear to this long formula, not to freeze our understanding of God, but to fix limits beyond which understanding becomes misunderstanding, and then monstrosity and horror. The fourth and fifth century built this wall on our behalf, so that the joy and security and depth of truth – always deeper and sounder than we can grasp – could be ours perpetually. We are free and easy with the Faith because they raised the Creed for it and for us.

But we are not Byzantine citizens ourselves, and have a limit to our capacity for metaphysics about Christ. Eight pages of this sort of thing is enough. We break off now, and next week contemplate that strange, atrocious and magnificent age, and the Creed that was their great accomplishment, and is still our health, and always will be, until ages end and faith will be over – since we shall be walking by sight, seeing face to face, knowing as we are known.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I Corinthians xiii<sup>12</sup>.