Catholicism 101

Church Part 2: The Creed and the Development of Church doctrines

I am guessing that at some point you wondered why the church believes what she does. Or maybe you asked the question, what do I have to believe to be a Christian? Those two questions will be explored in detail in this topic. The development of the Church's teachings is a complicated and convoluted process. Basically over the last 2000 years the Church has reflected on the one central event of Christianity – the life, death, and Resurrection Jesus – and developed all her teachings from it. The Creed, also known as the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed, is the fundamental statement of belief that defines a person as a Christian. The rest of the teachings are broken into several categories: dogmas, doctrines, and teachings and practices.

The Creed

A creed is a statement of belief. Usually a creed denotes the basic beliefs a person needs to believe in order to follow a certain faith. For example Islam requires its adherents to believe that there is one God and Muhammad is his prophet. Each of the creeds listed above are different but all proclaim the same central beliefs of the Christian church. These creeds formed around the same age of the Church, the 3rd through 4th centuries. The Apostles Creed is credited to be the first creed written. Although it bears the title of the earliest creed, we have little evidence to date the origins of this creed. Most believe that it was in use by the turn of the 3rd century and widely distributed by this time. The Apostles Creed is Trinitarian in structure and emphasizes the three persons of God and the unity of God. This Creed is still widely used throughout the Christian world especially by Lutherans, Anglicans, Orthodox, and Catholics.

The Nicene Creed has the strongest historical roots. This creed was developed as a result of the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. The Council of Nicaea debated and declared the Trinitarian formula and the basic teachings of the Christian Church. These teachings include: the divinity of Jesus, the humanity of Jesus, the three persons of God, the Trinity, the unity of God, the nature of the Church, and the basic beliefs of the Christian church namely eternal life and baptism. From these proclamations the Council Fathers developed a statement of belief that become the core profession of all those who profess to be Christian. This Creed is used widely by the Catholic Church and all branches of the Orthodox churches. Lutherans, most Anglicans, and many Protestants will also use this creed.

All of these creeds have the same basic message they proclaim: belief in one God, Jesus is God, the Holy Spirit is God, the three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – all are God and called the Trinity, belief in the holy catholic Church, and the resurrection from the dead. All of these teachings form the basic belief of a Christian.

We have already discussed in prior weeks the nature of God, the divinity and humanity of Jesus, that the Holy Spirit is God, and the three are the Trinity. These points cover 75% of the creed. Having discussed some aspects of the Church in the last section, I want to focus on the final stanza of the Creed. The Nicene Creed explains the basic belief in the church better than the other two.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.
I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins
and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The first four adjectives used to describe the Church are called the "four marks of the Church", namely one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. These four adjectives describe the basic belief and understanding of the church that Jesus instituted. So, what do they mean? One. Jesus instituted one church. The oneness of the church can be complicated for people as we recognize the plethora of Christian churches that exist today. As you may recall from the last section, one of the images of the church is as the bride of Christ. Jesus can only have one bride, he only has one body, he can only give himself entirely to one church. Therefore, we cannot believe in anything except that Jesus would institute, love, save, and wed for eternity one Church. But what does the one church mean? The oneness of the Church recognizes that all who are validly baptized are part of the one church. Additionally, it is a reminder to everyone that Jesus is the head of his church and he calls the shots. We don't get to create whichever version of Christianity we want or assume that desires of Jesus match with our desires. A "one Church" also means one faith, one head, one system of beliefs as proclaimed by Saint Paul (see Ephesians 4:5). Holy. The idea of the church as "holy" causes a lot of people to pause. The corruption of the church leaders, the dissention amongst its followers, and even the challenges within a given parish do not lend people to believe that the church is holy. Yet, this word extends far beyond what we see today. The church is holy in that is it united to Jesus. Its "wholeness" comes from its connection to Jesus the head. We also proclaim that her teachings are inerrant, good for all people, and true to the nature of Jesus. At the end of time, Jesus will wash his Church in his blood and make her clean and holy for eternity. The church is on her way to the fullness of holiness. Catholic. The word "catholic" is a technical term meaning universal. The Church's teachings and structure relate to all people, times, and places. Everyone can find a place within the universal Church and the universal Church can reach out and integrate to all cultures. Often we only see the European side of the church and not the many ways in which she has adopted an brought into the church the many cultures of the world. Apostolic. The Church was founded and is rooted in the Apostolic witness. We do not exist as a modern society of believers but as a perpetual witness formed by the experience of the Apostles. The Apostles seeing the death and Resurrection of Jesus passed down their witness from generation to generation leading to us who are also witnesses. The Apostolic witness is the strongest example of the truth of Jesus rising from the dead.

The final lines define who is in the church. Through both Jesus' example and the teachings of St. Paul, the church since the age of the Apostles has maintained the centrality of baptism for the believer. A person is included in the church only if the person has been baptized. This definition has caused many challenges. What about the people who came before Jesus? What about the people who never heard about Jesus and never had the chance to hear about him? The centrality of baptism focuses on incorporating the person into the life of Jesus not the physical act of pouring water over a person. The ritual of baptism where water is poured over a person and pronounced a Christian, ensures and makes public the new status of the person as a Christian.

Yet, the Church has always taught that God is not bound by our rituals. If a person wants to be baptized but has never met a Christian or had the opportunity to be baptized, God can bestow on them the status of baptized by the faith from their own desire. Therefore, the Christian has the role to introduce all people to Jesus but God can choose to save and baptize whomever he wants. The last two lines focus on why baptism is important. The Christian is not a person whose primary focus is to change the world or to redeem the world. The focus of the Christian is the life to come: Heaven. Thus the final two lines are about the resurrection of the body and life with God. The Christian believes that this life is valuable because our bodies will rise from the dead and we will be judged based on our lives. More about this topic when we discuss Heaven, Hell and Purgatory.

The Development of Doctrine

Obviously the church teaches more than the few points contained in the Nicene Creed. The teachings of the church have grown so expansive as to encompass library rooms. The basic question that many people ask is, what of those teachings am I supposed to believe? Although I am not a fan of this question, it does hint at some very important concepts. What do I have to believe? What is authentically taught? What happens when teachings conflict? How are teaching developed and promulgated?

Dogmas

What are dogmas? Dogmas are the authentic teachings of the church that are held as absolute and unchangeable truths. These teachings are considered inerrant and timeless, which means they cannot contain error and are true for all of time. Many people criticize such an exalted view of the church's ability to define its teachings. Let's take a step back: what is the church doing by declaring these teachings as infallible? By declaring something infallible the church is making a statement about the reality of the world. We believe and hold as true that God exists. If God exists, then he exists for all time. This teaching cannot change without changing the fabric of the universe. This example illustrates the defense of dogmas. Since God exists and God is reasonable, then anything that conforms to reason should hold true. Since God is outside of time and space, anything God reveals as true is true for all times and places as well. The Church put limits on dogmas to prevent misuse or misunderstanding of their nature and purpose. Dogmas can only be defined based on faith and morals. Thus we can only declare teachings infallible if they regard issues of the faith or of morality. Some examples include: the 7 Sacraments, the infallibility of the Pope, the core elements of the Mass, the pronouncement on the Trinity, and many more.

How is a dogma proclaimed? The primary way in which a dogma is proclaimed is through a council. When the church decides that an issue needs to be resolved, or a large enough issue warrants it, the pope can call a council. A council is a meeting of all the bishops of the church along with theologians and scholars in necessary fields. The bishops debate and discuss the issues at hand and then vote on the pronouncement. If a majority votes in favor, the issue is considered dogmatic, or declared a dogma. The basic idea is that if the bishops are gathered under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, then anything that the majority rules on is the authentic

teaching of the church. Another way that dogmas can be proclaimed is by the pope himself. The pope can declare any issue as infallible or dogmatic by declaring it infallible by the authority of St. Peter, called an *ex cathedra* statement. This can only be declared on issues regarding faith and morals and must be under the guidance of theologians and the development of doctrine by the church. This has only happened twice since 1850. Although some statements are dogmatic without the same declaration such as the declaration of a saint. Over the 2000 years of the church, we have held 21 councils.

Doctrines

What is a doctrine? A doctrine is a teaching of the church. Doctrines hold weight as authentic expressions of the faith but are not considered inerrant or infallible. Whenever a teaching holds enough weight that it seems important for the faith or holds generally true, it is considered a doctrine. Like dogmas, doctrines are only based on issues of faith and morality. Doctrines are more adaptable and open to change than a dogma. Doctrines can also be adjusted or updated to reflect a changing atmosphere or change in the world. Common doctrines include Transubstantiation – that the substance of bread and wine are changed into the substance of the Body and Blood of Jesus, social teachings, papal encyclicals, and many other teachings.

How are doctrines developed? Generally all doctrines begin by trying to explain the central mystery of Jesus and apply it to the modern world. This can begin by examining the spiritual life, the way we relate to one another, or an issue in the church. Theologians begin wrestling with it and the church starts to pray over this issue. As we live it out and develop it, the teaching gets stronger and clearer. Eventually it becomes clear enough to be declared as an authentic teaching. This declaration can come from a council, synod, pope, bishop, or group of theologians.

Teachings and practices

The lowest forms of expression of the faith are teachings and practices. These are things we simply do. Either we are trying to follow Jesus' commands or we are responding to a need in our world. These include everything that does not fit into dogmas or doctrines. Examples include: priestly celibacy, the specific music used during the Mass, homilies, the writings of bishops and theologians.

Writings from Rome

The church has a hierarchy of documents that she produces to help the faithful understand her teachings. These documents have general titles that give them their weight and help us understand their purpose. The problem is that most people don't understand what these titles and distinctions mean. As the final point of this topic, I am going to outline these document types and explain them.

Council Documents: These documents are the ones promulgated by a council. They hold the highest weight as infallible teachings.

Papal Bull: The pope uses a papal bull to formally declare something to the church. All forms of dogmatic pronouncements are in the form of Papal Bulls. These documents can also inaugurate and event such as the Year of Mercy convened by Pope Francis.

Apostolic Constitution: these are the most solemn declaration by the pope. They deal with primarily doctrinal matters or legal matters like the formation of a diocese.

Synod documents: these documents are produced from a synod or gathering of bishops, theologians, and experts to help the church understand how to approach an issue. They are classified as teachings and are meant to be instructive to the faithful.

Motu Proprio: A motu proprio is a document instructive to the church on a matter of doctrine or practice. Pope Benedict XVI issued the Motu Proprio *Summorum Pontificum* allowing the celebration of the Traditional Latin Mass or the Mass of the 1962 Missal.

Encyclical Letter: This is a letter written by the pope to the faithful encouraging them and explaining the faith. These fit in the realm of doctrine.

Apostolic Epistle or Letter: These are letters written by the pope to a specific audience or on a specific occasion.

Apostolic Exhortation: These documents are reflections on a specific issue given by the pope to the faithful or a group of people. The letter *Christus Vivit* written by Pope Francis to the young people of the Church is an example of this type of document.