

The Mass (Part XVII)

by Fr. Tim Church

THE CREED AND THE PRAYERS

Following the homily, the profession of faith is recited by the people, all standing. This is reserved for Sundays and feasts (solemnities). Although it was not its original use, placing the recitation of the creed in this particular place in the Mass allows it to function as the first response of the people to what has been proclaimed in the readings from Sacred Scripture and the homily.

In ancient times, the use of the creed was limited to the rite of Baptism. This allowed for some assurance that an adult who was entering the Church was properly prepared, and understood at least the rudiments of the faith. The creed was either recited from memory by the candidate for Baptism, or was presented in a question and answer form. There is still a rudiment of this practice in the rituals associated with the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). On the third Sunday of Lent, the creed is presented to those who have been studying to become Christians. This is truly the celebrated and proper place of the creed. It became part of the Mass in about the end of the sixth century. The Church was plagued with heresies, especially those regarding the relationship of the persons of the Holy Trinity. One in particular taught that the Son was not divine, only a very holy man. The recitation of the Creed helped to regularly clarify the Church's teaching on this matter.

There are actually a number of slightly different creeds used in the Church. The Apostles Creed (named in honor of the Apostles, rather than written by them) is used at Baptisms, the Rosary and can be used at Masses with children. The Nicene Creed, which earns its name from the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.), was slightly enlarged by the Council of Constantinople, and is the Creed recited at the Mass. The Athanasian Creed is a more complex profession of faith in the Holy Trinity and is rarely used.

It is helpful for us to remember that we share a common set of beliefs that can be summarized in the Creed. More than anything, however, the use of the creed in the Mass is a sign of the unity of faith within the Catholic Church.

The prayer of the faithful follows the Creed. This is an ancient part of the Mass, and is referred to by many saintly writers from the earliest days. It had fallen out of use in the days before Vatican II, but was restored in the reform of the liturgy mandated by that council. The *General Instructions of the Roman Missal has this to say about the prayers:

"In the Prayer of the Faithful, the people respond in a certain way to the word of God which they have welcomed in faith and, exercising the office of their baptismal priesthood, offer prayers to God for the salvation of all." (#69)

The importance of these prayers in the Mass is centered on the notion of the "baptismal priesthood" of all the faithful. While we usually think of the word 'priesthood' describing only an ordained minister, it is, in fact, part of the character of the whole Church. *"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy*

nation, a people of his own." (1 Peter 2:9) The "nation of priests" includes both the ordained and the non-ordained, or lay members, and here the idea of priesthood is extended to include the care we are to have for all of humanity. This care is expressed in bringing these needs to the Lord's altar.

While it is common for the people gathered for a Mass to vocalize their own individual petitions, the norms do not call for this. Caution must be exercised that we never include prayers intended to emphasize particular theological ideas, political opinions or an expression that might be intended to disturb those gathered for Mass. A pastor would be forced to curtail open intercessions if such bad practices persisted. There is certainly a spiritual advantage in speaking our needs, but this is oftentimes impractical. Silence can be a powerful prayer. We do not need many words to get God's attention. (See Luke 6:7.)

* The General Instructions of the Roman Missal are published as part of the "sacramentary." This is the book used by the priest and others at the Mass, and includes all the prayers and words spoken during the Mass. The instructions are certainly highly regarded and should be seen as "law" in the Church.