

Bulletin Reflections - 12 Articles of Faith

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Introduction: "I Believe"

"Faith is man's response to God's initiative."
-Catechism of the Catholic Church 26

In this short statement by the Catechism above, we find a profound truth about the gift of faith. This truth was echoed by Pope Benedict when he said, "The heart indicates that the first act by which one comes to faith is God's gift and the action of grace..." (PF 10). What we find expressed here is that faith -our ability to say 'I believe' - comes about in our hearts only as a *response* to something that God does *first*. The words we speak, "I believe", do not come about in a vacuum, or as a result of our own initiative. Rather, our words "I believe" are the result of God's having first initiated an offer of love to us. This truth that *faith is a response to God's initiative* can be likened to the response of a woman who hears the man she loves ask her to be his bride. The man initiates the gift of love by asking her to be his wife. Her words "Yes" are a *response* to the initiative of the man who loves her. The gift of faith is much like this loving dialogue that takes place between a woman and a man in love. Faith has this *spousal* quality to it. God is the Bridegroom who reveals himself to man and the human race is the Bride who responds to this gesture by saying "Yes, I believe."

In this spousal dialogue between God and man, it is God who acts *first*. It is God, whose desire to be known is even greater than our desire to know him, who makes himself known. He does this, not in a purely abstract way, but rather in a real context in history. The whole of salvation history from Genesis onward is the story of God enacting his desire to make himself known to us. Salvation history tells us that God first revealed himself to the People of Israel and then definitively in the coming of the Son of God in the flesh. In Christ, we find God's act of total and complete self-disclosure to us. God reveals who he is *in fullness* when he takes on human flesh, suffers and dies for us, and rises from the dead in glory. What we understand from this is that man is not left alone in his search for God. God desires to be found, known and loved. It is for this reason that he initiated a covenant with us and established the Church so that he may be approached. This initiation of self-revelation on the part of God is at the heart of the Christian mystery. The Church has pondered in awe for 2000 years the wonder of God's desire to be known by man and his act of self-revelation in the person of Jesus Christ.

Faith, then, is our response to this initiation on the part of God. It is he who says, "This is who I am" and we respond by saying "I believe." We should keep this mystery of love very close to our hearts every time we pray the Creed. Each time we stand at Mass and say "I believe...", let us be aware that these words are proceeding from our lips as part of a loving dialogue between God and us. Our words are a response to a profound gesture on the part of God to make himself known to us. We are not speaking these words in a void. We speak them because we have first been loved and as a response we say with all our being, "I believe."

~Meghan Cokeley, Office for the New Evangelization, Archdiocese of Philadelphia

Article 1:

“I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.”

“Abba! Father” ~Romans 8:15

It will never cease to be a cause of wonder for the Church that she is able to address God as “Father”. Through the coming of the Son of God in the flesh, Christians are given a share in the Son’s own identity and can call out, with Him, to the first Person of the Trinity, “Abba!” This “Abba!” is the baptismal cry of every believer. It is the language of perfect prayer, the very utterance of the Holy Spirit who speaks this word within our baptized hearts. What does it mean to say “Abba”? Its significance is far more profound than we realize. A Protestant minister, Malcolm Smith, gave a sermon that sheds light on this. In the Hebrew language, “Abba” is not so much properly translated as “Father”, but more appropriately as “Dadda or Daddy”. “*Abba*” is not a word that would be used by an adult, it is a word that an infant would use when just beginning to formulate words. It is the language of a Hebrew infant fumbling about with sounds trying to address the man who gave him life. For Jesus, and then St. Paul, to take up the language of “Abba” was to communicate something dramatic—that the Son belongs to the Father at the level of intimacy analogous to an infant in the arms of his Daddy. This is why the Jews were so scandalized by the Son’s reference to God as *Abba*—it was because Christ was using language of such familiarity, such radical dependence, such total identity to describe the God whose name could not even be uttered without the penalty of death. And what is so astonishing is that we, when baptized, receive the Holy Spirit who enters our hearts and cries out this same “Abba!” on our behalf. What does this mean but that we are granted a share in the intimacy and radical dependence of the Son on the Father? It means that we are grafted into the dialogue of love between Father and Son and are able too to address God, not just as Father, but more significantly as “Daddy” - *the one on whom the totality of my existence and happiness depends*. It means that we, as Christians, are called to assume a posture before God of total vulnerability and dependence, as an infant just learning to speak who depends on his father for even the most basic of needs.

An even further wonder is that not only do we as Christians participate in this beautiful gift but also, according to Saint Paul, the whole of creation is “groaning under labor pains” waiting for our adoption as children of God (Rom 8). What this reveals to us is that not only human beings, but also all of creation is destined to be the recipient of the Father’s outpouring of love in His Son and Holy Spirit. What a magnificent reality that we profess each time in the Creed that, as the Father’s creation, we and the entire created world are destined for His love! We, along with the whole created order, bear the stamp of being *from* Him and *for* Him. And on behalf of the whole created world, we acknowledge our Creator as such by crying out *Abba!*. This is the role of the Church, the very reason for her existence, to draw mankind into this relationship of intimacy with God. ~*Meghan Cokeley, Office for the New Evangelization, Archdiocese of Philadelphia*

Article 2:

“I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father.”

(Recommended as a two-part reflection during the Season of Advent)

(Part 1) There is rich food for the heart and mind in these particular lines of the Nicene Creed. What first strikes us is the mysterious language used by the Church to describe Jesus Christ. We profess that he is “begotten”, “born of the Father”, “not made” and “consubstantial.” This is certainly not the language of every day life. And yet, as with all things in the Church, it is beneficial for us to ask the question “why does the Church say this?”. In one sense, the answer is easy. We tend to say over and over the things we feel most strongly about. We repeat them to ourselves in order to take in their full significance, and we repeat them to others when we want them to be fully understood (e.g. think of the line, “Repetition is the mother of all learning.”). Therefore, the Church articulates the divinity of Jesus Christ in such a repetitive, litany-like way because it is the most precious of all her truths—that truth which the Church never tires of pondering, professing and affirming. Jesus was not just a holy man, he was not just a prophet with a divine message to deliver from God. He *is* God. In each of these syllables of the Creed we find the Church exalting in wonder, “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God” became man, became one of us! That it was *God* who made himself visible, *God* who taught and spoke, healed and delivered, that it was *God* who suffered and died on the Cross is a gift of love so astonishing that the Church must repeat it to herself over and over in order to take it in fully. For two thousand years, the Church has been meditating aloud upon the divine mystery that *God* was made flesh and made his dwelling among us.

The Church’s exaltation in this mystery has a concrete story behind it. The language we use to speak about Jesus Christ, Second Person of the Trinity, emerges from one of the hottest fires of controversy and disagreement that the Church has ever known: the early Church’s struggle to articulate *who Jesus Christ is*. In the effort to answer this question, a fourth century priest named Arius and his followers contended that while it was possible to say that Jesus Christ was the “Son of God”, it was not possible to say that he was “God” in the strict sense of the word. The Arians attributed to Christ a *likeness* to the divine in so far as the Son of God was the most superior of all creatures, created by God before all else that exists. And yet, in their famous tag line, the Arians insisted that “there was a time when the Son was not”. This meant that Jesus Christ was not eternal. He did not share the divine nature of God himself. He was *God-like*, but not God. The arguments the Arians made were subtle and persuasive, so much so that Arian teaching spread far and wide in the Church during the fourth century. It was the cause of conflict and division within communities and even among bishops, who fought with other bishops to preserve the apostolic truth that Jesus Christ is God. The conflict over this question was so intense that some even lost their lives in fights defending the full divinity of Christ. The controversy was so great that eventually the Church called a Council which convened in Nicaea in 325AD.

(Part 2) At the Council of Nicaea, the truth about Christ’s full divinity was reaffirmed using the Greek philosophical term *homoousios*, which means “of one being and nature as God himself”. This was in contradistinction to the Arian proposal of Christ as *homoiousios*, “*similar to the divine nature*”. (Notice that the Greek letter *iota*, “i”, is added here, changing the meaning of the word

entirely. This is the reason for the expression, “It doesn't make one *iota* of a difference”.) This all-important word, *homoousios*, is the icon of the triumph of truth over error in a time of terrible controversy. It also encapsulates the Church's greatest wonder—that God, not a creature, but God himself became man and saved us.

The word, *homoousios*, for which the blood of martyrs was shed, is translated into Latin *consubstantialis* and into English “consubstantial”. This is the reason that, with the revised translation of the Roman Missal last year, the Church re-established our use of this particular word *consubstantial* as part of the Creed. For the Church, the word itself is deserving of reverence. It saved the early Church from an error that would have destroyed our Catholic Faith. It recalls the magnificent history of the Christological controversies and the great battle of the saints and fathers of the Church who labored to preserve the full truth about Jesus Christ—that he is fully God and fully man.

During this Advent, when the Church ponders the great mystery of Jesus Christ, the Son of God become man, there is special grace available for us to enter more deeply into the mystery of God's own emptying of self to become one of us. For the Arians, this was an impossibility. God was too great, his nature incompatible with the material world. In our modern world, there is a similar error prevailing. Modern man identifies a disjunction between God and the world, using reason alone, modern man finds it impossible that God should be so close to us. For many, it is more convenient to keep God at an arm's length and make Jesus into just a holy man whose teaching we admire. All the more reason should we take up with ardor these particular lines of the Creed, to accept deep into our hearts what we say every Sunday “I believe in Jesus Christ...only begotten Son of God...consubstantial with the Father.” We should remember with these words the great zeal of the saints who fought to the death to affirm the divinity of Jesus Christ, to affirm that God has done what the greatest intellects thought impossible. It is precisely this mystery that is the source of the Church's undying wonder, the fire of her missionary activity and the light that attracts men and women of every generation. ~*Meghan Cokeley, Office for the New Evangelization, Archdiocese of Philadelphia*

For more reading on the Christological controversies, try:

Sources of Early Christian Thought: The Christological Controversy,
trans./ed. By Richard A. Norris, Jr.

Article 3: The Incarnation

We have reached the section of the Nicene Creed when we bow profoundly from the waist and say, “**For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.**” This physical gesture of bowing as we speak is an expression of our great reverence for this central mystery of our faith—that God emptied himself to take on our humanity and save us. In these lines, we are face to face with the deepest mystery of divine love, the very truth of who God is. The language we use in the Creed is that God “came down” from Heaven. Saint Paul uses this same language in his great hymn to the Incarnation, “Though he was in the form of God,...he emptied himself, taking the form of a

slave...” (Phil 2:7). In the Greek, the word used to describe God’s “coming down from Heaven” is *kenosis*, which means “self-emptying, or total pouring out of self”. What this indicates is that we are not reverencing God’s love in the Incarnation in an ambiguous way. Rather, we are reverencing God’s love in a very specific form—that of the total pouring out of self. And what is so astonishing is that God did not empty himself just on this one occasion in order to become man. Rather, the Incarnation reveals that God Himself *is* self-emptying love.

The implications of this for our lives is immense. For if it is true that God *is* *kenosis*, eternal self-emptying love, then the whole world and all of humanity, created *by* him, is penetrated by this same reality. It means that all that exists bears within itself the inner logic of *kenosis*, *self-emptying love*. In a very real and practical way, this means that the more we strive to live self-emptying love, to overcome our selfishness, root out sin and replace it with kenotic love, the more we fulfill the very meaning of our existence and the existence of the whole created world (*cf.* *Gaudium Et Spes* 24). Striving to live in this form of love brings us profound peace, because we are living in accord with the very meaning of our humanity. However, working towards holiness does not just bring us *personal* peace, it also becomes a source of peace for others. The more we manifest in our lives self-giving love, we become a reminder and a *call* to others of the very meaning of their own existence. Whether or not we ever see it, holiness stirs people in their depths because it resonates with the very logic of their existence. Even further, holiness radiates outward to the whole created world and it illumines the very reason for the world’s existence. This is what Christ means when he demands of us, “Let your light shine before men.” A life of kenotic, self-emptying love, makes visible *in the flesh* the deepest meaning of the world. It issues an irresistible call to others to order their lives the same way. This is the very heart of evangelization. At its core, evangelization is a call, issued through the witness of holiness, to live the self-emptying love of the Incarnation and thereby, illumine for others the true meaning of their lives.

It is only through the gift of faith that our eyes can see and understand this reality. There are times when it is extremely hard to believe that the world and humanity is penetrated by the logic of God’s self-emptying love. The experience of profound evil can lead us to doubt this intensely. For this reason, we must ask God to increase our faith. It is only through faith that we can turn our experiences of sin and evil into a sacrificial offering to God and precisely there, in the moment of suffering, discover at the heart of reality a love that is stronger than sin and death and the true meaning of the world as created by Love and for Love. ~*Meghan Cokeley, Office for the New Evangelization, Archdiocese of Philadelphia*

Article 4: The Passion and Death of Christ

“For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried...”

We now reach the climax of the story of salvation. As we move through the Creed, it is good for us to linger here, in the moment of the Lord’s suffering and death. The first detail of this article of faith is that Christ suffered “for our sake.” For our sake. Let us let this sink in. Anyone who has reflected upon the pain and suffering undertaken by the Son of God, and recognizes that it was undertaken by him “for our sake” cannot but be moved in their depths. This mystery of God’s suffering “for our sake” reveals, as we saw last month, God’s own identity as self-emptying love. But it also reveals man’s identity as well. We are the ones for whom God underwent brutal torment, pain and even death. What does this mean about us?

What is God revealing through this mystery? That we are infinitely precious to him. We might try practicing this month a wonderful activity that will help this article of faith transform our lives and our relationships. Memorize this line from the Creed and keep it in mind throughout your day this month.

Try inserting a person's name into the statement of faith like this:

For _____'s sake, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried.

We might first begin with ourselves, to get a better sense of God's personal love for *me*. For example, I might reflect in my heart, "For my sake, he was crucified...". Then, as I go about my day, I might insert someone else's name. Perhaps I need to insert the name of my spouse whom lately I have been taking for granted or not reverencing as I should. Perhaps I could insert the names of my children, who are so close to me in the daily grind that I forget their lofty dignity before God. Consider inserting the name of your co-worker whom you find especially irritating, or the person who has recently hurt your feelings. Especially important would be to practice this with the names of those we do not like, those who have hurt us, or those people that we are often tempted to complain or gossip about. Imagine how a regular reflection upon the identity of those around us as *the one for whom the God suffered and died* would transform our relationships!

We might also consider using this little practice to aid our work of evangelization. It would change our hearts and open them to others if we looked at them and thought in our hearts, "For YOUR sake, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried." What might someone receive in an encounter with us if people experienced us looking at them in this way! And what an evangelical zeal to proclaim Christ to the world would be born in our hearts if this was what we really thought about ourselves and about those around us. ~*Meghan Cokeley, Office for the New Evangelization, Archdiocese of Philadelphia*

Article 5: ...and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures."

As we move in our journey to the Resurrection of Christ, we would be remiss if we did not reflect upon the *both* parts of this Article of Faith, which are more clearly seen when we profess the Apostles' Creed and say "he descended into hell and on the third day rose again from the dead." As we approach the Paschal Triduum, it is important for us not to pass over this most mysterious event in the life of Jesus Christ: his descent into hell. Our Catholic Tradition has always treasured this moment in the life of Christ, but admittedly in recent years, it is a truth that seems to have fallen from our Catholic memories. We believe that on Holy Saturday, while the Lord's body was in the tomb, he descended into hell to liberate all of the faithful who were imprisoned there since the beginning of time. Tradition holds that this included Adam and Eve, and the faithful followers of the Old Covenant such as Abraham, Moses and Elijah. We also refer to this moment as the "harrowing of hell". This title captures the sense that Christ's entry

into hell defeats the power of Satan and breaks his hold on God's faithful children. In this mystery, we see hell bereft of many of its prisoners and devils hiding in a corner or grimacing in anger and fear. What does this wonderful mystery mean for us today? Each Holy Saturday the grace of Christ's descent into hell is made available to us. This means that the grace of his fearless entry into Satan's "territory", his triumph over the devil's pride and his breaking of Satan's power is still available to us! Let us, then, approach this holy day, bringing to Christ all of our own personal and societal "hells" with a new hope that it is also possible for Christ to descend into them and break the strongholds of the devil and sin. Perhaps there is a situation in our lives or in the world where sin and death seem to constantly prevail, or areas where the power of the devil seems well-established. These are the things that we must hand over to the Lord on Holy Saturday. We must allow him to descend into them and ask him to "harrow" the hold of sin and death that still prevails in our lives and in the world. If we do this, we know with confidence that we will reach the day of resurrection with Christ.

If we want to authentically live the new evangelization, we must take seriously the call to enter this mystery of Christ's dying, descent and resurrection. If we do this, we can expect radical transformation in our lives. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, "Through faith, this new life shapes the whole of human existence according to the radical new reality of the resurrection. To the extent that he freely cooperates, man's thoughts and affections, mentality and conduct are slowly purified and transformed, on a journey that is never completely finished in this life." This is the kind of *real life* transformation we can expect if we are willing to die and rise with him.
~Meghan Cokeley, Office for the New Evangelization, Archdiocese of Philadelphia

**Article 6: "He ascended into Heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father."
(Recommended for the Easter Season)**

We now arrive at the mystery of Christ's Ascension into Heaven. As a part of this mystery, we reflect upon the 40 days that the Lord spent with his disciples after his resurrection. We might wonder why the Lord spent this time with the disciples rather than just ascend directly to heaven after he rose from the dead. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI teaches us that during those 40 days, Christ was "training the senses" of the disciples, accustoming them to encountering him no longer in his earthly body but in his glorified body, and preparing them for the wholly new reality of his presence to them after the Ascension. The path of these 40 days was the path of moving the disciples from their earthly way of relating to him, accustomed, as they were, to speaking, acting and communing with him the way they would relate to anyone else. Christ was moving them into a *heavenly* way of relating to him, which would begin when he took his seat at the right hand of the Father in Heaven. This reality would be something new and unfamiliar to their mortal experience. After the Ascension, the disciples' relationship with Christ would remain entirely concrete and incarnate ("in the flesh"). But now, the Lord would be no longer subject to earthly limits such as space and time and he would now be present to *all* times and places, at a level of intimacy that hitherto had not been possible. This represents for the disciples—and for us—a radical new form of relationship, something that requires time for our mortal humanity to adjust

to. This is the meaning of the 40 days prior to the Ascension. The Lord, in loving reverence for our humanity, offers his disciples *time* to become accustomed to a new way of being and acting with him – leading them beyond the limits of mortal, earthly reality and moving us into heavenly ways of living in communion with him.

In many ways we can say that this period of 40 days before the Ascension represents the journey that all of us must make. We are all in need of a “training of the senses”, time to “adjust” to relating to Christ *as he truly is* in heaven. So often in the beginning of our journey of discipleship, we relate to the Lord in ways that are bound by our earthly conceptions of reality. The journey of holiness is the Lord’s gentle work of moving us beyond our earthly conceptions of how we think God should act, make us feel and direct our lives, and moving us into a more and more authentic experience of the *divine* form of relationship that we discover in the glorified Christ. Let us enter these 40 days of the Resurrection and ask the Lord to “train our senses”, just as he did the disciples, and help us turn our gaze heavenward as we watch him ascend to the right hand of his Father in Heaven. ~*Meghan Cokeley, Office for the New Evangelization, Archdiocese of Philadelphia*

**Article 7:
He will come again in glory to judge the living
and the dead and his Kingdom will have no end.**

In this part of the Nicene Creed, we profess faith in God’s authority to exercise judgment over the entire human race. This article of faith, while it may fill us with a degree of fear, should also fill us with joy. For it reveals to us that our actions are not meaningless. Rather, our actions are infused with a special dignity and weight because God himself is deeply interested in them. When we profess faith in the judgment of the living and the dead, we actually refer to two moments of judgment: the Particular Judgment that takes place at the moment of our death and the Final or General Judgment that will take place at the end of time. In the Particular Judgment at the moment of our death, each of us will immediately stand before God and give an account of how we have responded to his grace during our lives. We will then receive from God his judgment and we will pass into hell, purgatory or heaven. The judgment that comes at the moment of our death is permanent and irrevocable.

This being the case, it is a wonder, then, that God will also judge us at the end of time. If judgment is permanent at the moment of our death, why the need to be judged again? The Church’s teaching about the Final Judgment reveals the truth that while the eternal consequences of our actions can be known at the moment of our death, the full *effects* of those actions in history must await the end of history. Our actions – acts of love and acts of sin – are not limited to our immediate surroundings. They have a ripple effect outward and continue on in time to affect others, who in turn affect others, and so forth, until the very end of time. This means that every act of love will echo beyond us, affecting the course of history for the good until the very moment that Christ comes again. At the same time, every sin will also pass beyond us from generation to generation, causing negative effects in history until the end of time. It for this reason that a final judgment is

necessary. Only when time ends will the full extent of our actions be known and either lamented or rejoiced over.

However, lest we be crushed by this weighty account of our actions, one more astonishing twist must be added to this account of the judgment of God: the fountain of infinite Divine Mercy that comes to us from the pierced Heart of Jesus Christ. For the Church teaches that when we submit our sins and failures to the great mercy of Christ in the Sacrament of Confession, we are bathed in the mercy of God. As a fruit of this, it is the mercy of God *instead* that passes through history in place our sin. For this reason, our repented sins, in their openness to Divine Mercy, will have the same, if not greater, impact for the good of human history than had we never sinned at all! This is the incomprehensible goodness of God's merciful love. It is for this reason that we should never fear judgment, whether Particular or Final. If we are living a life of the sacraments and are leaning radically on the mercy of Christ through a regular practice of the sacrament of Confession, the moment of judgment will only be a cause of rejoicing and happiness. For we will see how God was able to turn our failures into sources of life and goodness for us, those around us and for the entire course of history. It is for this reason that we will sing with the Psalmist, *Misericordias Domini in eternum cantabo* - "I will sing the mercy of God for all eternity" (Ps 89:1). ~*Meghan Cokeley, Office for the New Evangelization, Archdiocese of Philadelphia*

Article 8:

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

Who is the Holy Spirit? The Third Person of the Blessed Trinity is perhaps the most mysterious of the Divine Persons. He does not bear a name to which we can immediately relate, such as we can with "Father" and "Son." The Holy Spirit has many symbols—fire, wind, dove, oil—and is present in all of the actions of salvation history—creation, incarnation, redemption, glorification. And yet, who is he? We profess in the Nicene Creed that the Holy Spirit is he who "proceeds from the Father and the Son." In saying this we are reminded of the great mystery of God as an "eternal exchange of love" (CCC 221). The Trinity is Father and Son eternally giving and receiving infinite love. This love, exchanged between Father and Son, is so infinitely intense that it actually *is* a third person—the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, then, is the Love of the Father and the Son. What is so amazing about this reality is that through the death and resurrection of Christ, we become partakers of this eternal outpouring of love, who is the Holy Spirit.

We learn from St. Paul that when the Spirit enters our hearts, he cries out "Abba!" (Gal 4, Rom 8). Pondering this mystery, we begin to understand that when we receive the Holy Spirit, he does not speak about himself, but directs our gaze to the Father and Son. As he enters our hearts, the Holy spirit speaks the words of Christ himself, the words of a Son addressing his Father, "Abba!". This means that the Holy Spirit's central work is that of making Christ present. This is true both in our hearts, and also in the world. Whenever and wherever we invoke the Holy Spirit, he comes to make Christ present so that he may glorify the Father. In fact, the Catechism explains that it is the Holy Spirit alone who "unveils" the Son. In other words, it is only through

the Holy Spirit that it is possible to know, love and understand Jesus. If we, as disciples of Jesus, wish to bring Christ to the world, then it is only through the presence of the Holy Spirit that this can be accomplished. We must, then, cultivate deep intimacy with the Third Person of the Trinity, begging him to come, make present and unveil Christ, so that the world might know him. The urgency of the new evangelization is an urgent plea for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Let us open our hearts to Him and call Him down! ~Meghan Cokeley, *Office for the New Evangelization, Archdiocese of Philadelphia*

Article 9: The Church
“I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.”

So often in our discussions about evangelization, we have very little trouble convincing people of the goodness of Jesus Christ and the desirability of knowing him. Most people are attracted to the idea of encountering the Lord personally, experiencing his love and relating to him as a best friend. Where we typically run into roadblocks is not so much with the person of Jesus Christ, but rather, the institutional Church that he founded. For the Church, in all of the human frailty and, at times, scandalous behavior of some of her members, is for many not as easy a pill to swallow as the loving Son of God who died on the Cross for us. Add to this the typical American mindset that views Jesus Christ and the Church as separate realities. For example, you will hear people say, “Jesus Christ, yes. The Church, no.” Or, “The Gospel, yes. The teachings of the Church, no.” Or, “I am spiritual, but not religious.” We hear variations on this kind of thinking all the time.

But for the Catholic, Christ and his Church are one, distinct from one another and yet entirely inseparable. Do we not say that the Church is Christ’s Body? As much as it is impossible to separate Jesus from his own body, is it impossible to separate Jesus from his Church. This logic traces its origins back to the Incarnation itself. When God took on human flesh, salvation took on visible, incarnate form *permanently*. This means that Christ’s presence in history, even after he ascends to the Father, will always have visible, incarnate (*in the flesh*) form. Just as it is true that 2000 years ago Jesus Christ could be seen, touched, heard and approached, so now, just as truly, Christ continues to be seen, touched, heard and approached in the Church, his Body. Think of how the Church has visible shape (hierarchy*), audible voice (creed) and face-to-face encounter (sacraments) built into her very structure! As our Synod Fathers articulated, “the Church is the space offered by Christ in history where we can encounter him...” (Synod 2012 Message 3). This means that, even in all of the weakness of her members, the visible, incarnate Church is the place where Jesus Christ makes himself known to man and makes possible the fullness of an encounter with him. For the Catholic, there is no separation between Christ and his Church. Our evangelization efforts, then, must be deeply and thoroughly penetrated by a deep love for not only for Jesus Christ but also for his Church, who makes it possible for us to encounter him. For us, the great joy and source of our proclamation is knowing Jesus Christ who is *alive in his Church* and, precisely through the visibility and tangibility of the Church, is perfectly accessible to us. ~Meghan Cokeley, *Office for the New Evangelization, Archdiocese of Philadelphia*

(**hierarchy is a Greek word meaning “sacred order”; it includes the Pope, bishops, priests, deacons and the lay faithful. “Hierarchy” means there is an order in the Church that is holy, instituted by God. All of us, while our roles and ‘place’ in the Church’s ‘order’ are different, together make up the hierarchy, the “sacred order” of the Church.*)

Article 10: The Forgiveness of Sins “I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins”

The Church has always taught that God’s central motive for becoming man was so that he could offer himself in atonement for human sin. On the Crucifix, we contemplate this great mystery of love, that God *himself* would do the work of satisfying his own justice and take upon himself the punishment due to the rest of us because of our sin. When Jesus Christ made his self-offering to the Father on our behalf, his self-gift so overwhelmingly satisfied divine justice that a deluge of mercy was unleashed into the world, a flood that has no end and is never exhausted. The Church teaches that this deluge of forgiveness is made accessible to the human race through the sacraments of the Church. Through the sacraments, the infinite mercy of God reaches out and touches the concrete lives of individual men and women in every time and place.

The Church teaches that all of the sacraments have the character of forgiving sins. This economy of forgiveness is first unlocked for us at Baptism, which forgives original, mortal (serious/deadly) and venial (less serious) sin. After Baptism, the Holy Eucharist forgives venial sin and helps strengthen us against further sin, as do the other sacraments. Confession is the only sacrament after Baptism that forgives mortal sin. We can say that it is *the* sacrament of God’s merciful love. Confession cleanses the heart, maintains the flow of grace in the soul and repairs damaged relationships (both with God and others). Regular recourse to the sacrament of Confession, then, is an absolute *must* for a healthy spiritual life and also a healthy spiritual community.

This last point is perhaps one of the most important areas of reflection in our conversation about the new evangelization. When looking for the reasons that faith has waned in so many parish communities, we should consider seriously that a major cause is the decrease in the practice of regular sacramental Confession among practicing Catholics. Consider how the Church is a living body, linked together by spiritual bonds and kept alive by the grace of God flowing among us, much like the blood that flows through the human body, keeping it alive. Sin, on the other hand, works like spiritual cholesterol. When it is allowed to reign unchecked (unconfessed), it builds up in the heart clogging the spiritual arteries*. This “build-up” of sin constricts grace and decreases the flow of spiritual life, causing the decline of life in the person and in the community to which he belongs. Imagine, then, the deadening effect of long-term and widespread neglect of the sacrament of Confession in a parish! On the other hand, imagine what an unleashing of new grace and life for a parish will follow upon the restoration of a culture of regular sacramental Confession. It is safe to say that the new evangelization will not flourish among us unless a mindset of seeking

the forgiveness of sins and regular recourse to the sacrament of Confession is resurrected in our communities. Let us devote a good portion of our time and energy this year to re-kindling among practicing Catholics a lively sense of the beauty of Confession and the power of forgiveness found in all of the sacraments. As the spiritual arteries of our parish communities are unclogged, we will be amazed at the deluge of grace and new life that begins to pour forth among us. ~*Meghan Cokeley, Office for the New Evangelization, Archdiocese of Philadelphia*

**Thanks to Matthew Pinto, president of Ascension Press, for the analogy of the 'clogged arteries' in this context.*

Article 11: The Resurrection of the Body **“...and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead...”**

The Catechism tells us that the resurrection of the body is an “essential element of the Christian faith” (991), and yet, how many of us can say that we have spent much time thinking about this article of faith? Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, God has revealed to us the destiny of our humanity, namely, that at the end of time, our bodies will rise from the dead and be reunited with our souls for eternity. Those who have lived faithfully to God will receive their bodies and endure in Heaven, while those who have lived in rebellion will receive their bodies and pass, body and soul, into Hell. This article of faith completes the Christian mystery of hope, for it states that God does not act to save the soul alone, but the *whole human person* who is both body and soul. This means that the body, too, is subject to the redemptive work of Jesus Christ which was begun for each of us with the bathing of our bodies in baptismal waters.

This mystery is replete with powerful truths. It reveals that the human person is not a soul trapped inside a body, but rather that the human person *is* both body and soul. The body is integral to the very nature of being human. This mystery reveals that because our bodies are destined for eternal life, the perfect fulfillment of the body is not found in any pleasure or happiness in this life. Rather, it is only and finally fulfilled in the bliss of eternal union with God. This means that the body is not “dumb matter”, nor is it disposable, nor is it something that can be manipulated or abused. The body is created to be glorified in Heaven, and one day, for those who live life in accord with God’s will, existence in the body will be free from the corruption of death (i.e. no more wrinkles, grey hair, weight gain, sickness, fatigue, etc...!).

What does this mean for us *now*? In our modern culture, the body is treated as an instrument to be used to get what I want. But in truth, the body is an expression of the person and is destined for glory in God. Therefore, we Christians must live in a way that expresses this reality and “speaks” it to others. Some important ways to do this: Treat the body with dignity and respect through healthy living. Dress in a way that expresses the dignity of the body, which is destined for eternal life with God. This implies both modesty and beauty. Give your body to the full plan of God for human love, working hard to root out all manipulations of the body, and all forms of *using* the body (your own and others’) through contraception, pornography and other

forms of sexual impurity. When we live this way, we give witness to the truth of the destiny of the whole human person, body and soul, for eternal and glorious life with God. ~*Meghan Cokeley, Office for the New Evangelization, Archdiocese of Philadelphia*

Article 12: The Life of the World to Come

When we think about the afterlife, often we view it with a certain level of detachment. For some, especially the young, eternal life seems far away and irrelevant to the present moment. For others, eternal life is such a mystery that we choose to take an agnostic (“*we can’t really know*”) stance toward it. Still for others, the idea that our actions have weight and can merit eternal life or damnation is simply an antiquated notion and we prefer to think that God’s all-merciful love will bring everyone to Heaven in the end.

However, for the Christian, eternal life is not a distant reality. We believe that in the person of Jesus Christ, eternal life has broken into time, taken on human flesh, and been made permanently accessible to us. Through Baptism, the life of the world to come, that is, the life of union with Jesus Christ, is begun in the soul. Our task throughout our lives is to cultivate this seed and cooperate with its grace so that God’s eternal life flourishes and grows, takes over our entire life, and then bears fruit at our death in fullness in the life of Heaven.

This means that every day of our lives is already a participation in the life of the world to come—for better or for worse. Each of God’s commandments, the teachings of the Church, are a revelation of the life of Heaven. When the Church says, “This is sin”, she is really saying, “This action is contrary to love.” To the extent that we choose in our everyday life to remain faithful to the truth of love (and go to Confession when we fail), the life of Heaven flourishes in our souls. To the extent that we choose in our everyday life to make up our *own* definition of love, contrary to that of Christ, or refuse to love altogether, the life of Heaven dies in our souls and we begin to experience *already in this life* the state of Hell (life without God). In this way, the passage from death to eternity will be nothing more than a continuation of the life we have lived on earth, brought to its completion and irrevocable.

At the Second Coming of Christ at the end of time, the only two states that will persist are Heaven and Hell. Prior to this, there is also the possibility of Purgatory, the state of purification from sin in preparation for perfect union with God. Purgatory is a work of the merciful love of Our Heavenly Father who has provided for us the hope of eternal life with Him, even if we leave this life without having been perfectly healed of our sins. Those who enter Purgatory upon death are assured that they will eventually reach Heaven, but they are aware that the spiritual injuries they have caused through sin are still in need of healing and redemption.

Our profession of faith in the life of the world to come has everything to do with the life we live now. Let us allow the life of Heaven to penetrate and permeate every aspect of our lives, so that we radiate its reality to all those we meet, thus enkindling in others the desire for Heaven. ~*Meghan Cokeley, Office for the New Evangelization, Archdiocese of Philadelphia*