

Baptism of the Lord (C)

12th January 2025

'Nicene Creed I: God the Father / the Trinity'(CCC 198–267)

Is 40: "*Here is your God*"

Ps 103: *You send forth Your Spirit ...*

Titus 2–3: *it was for no reason except His own compassion that He saved us*

Lk 3:15–16,21–22: "*someone is coming. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit*"

The Church doesn't hang around, does she? We're hardly back from our Christmas vac., the Christmas trees barely taken down, the tinsel barely packed away, than we jump forward some 30 yrs, from the Bethlehem stable to the River Jordan: from Christ's Birth to His Baptism, skipping all those beautiful, but mostly unrecorded, 'hidden' years of the home life of the Holy Family in Nazareth. Whilst those domestic decades for Jesus, Mary & Joseph express the blessing that God can give through a saintly living-out of Marriage & family life, yet the Church also really wants us to press ahead and hear of Our Lord's public ministry: hence the leap forward to Jesus's suddenly coming out into the open at the Jordan. At that occasion, God manifested Himself in an extraordinary new Trinitarian way: the voice of the Father from heaven; the Son, in human flesh, standing on earth amongst His sinful people; the Holy Spirit descending on Him in peace and power like a dove.

Our Lord's Baptism, at the hands of John, marks the divine *sanctification* of baptism — no longer is it the 'baptism of John' (a baptism of water, a mere *sign*), but is now the 'Baptism of Jesus' (a baptism of "the Holy Spirit and fire," in other words, a genuine *sacrament*). Jesus's immersing Himself in those waters is not for His own consecration — though it does mark a great new, public, beginning for Him, aglow with the Spirit — but is for *our* consecration, our spiritual benefit, our being able to be brought into communion with Him, our being immersed in Him, by grace, for life. Let's never underestimate the life-changing significance of that blessed moment of our Baptism — whether it was many years ago, perhaps when we were tiny babies, or whether it was more recently, as adults; or whether it is still to come, perhaps this Easter. What a moment of grace Baptism is for us! A key part of embracing that divine gift in the ceremony of Baptism, of course, is making the *Baptismal Promises*, a 6-fold questioning that we (or our parents & godparents) responded to on the brink of our being baptized: a 3-fold

renunciation of the insidious wiles of the devil; then a contrary 3-fold *profession* of faith. Let's remind ourselves of the words of that Baptismal Profession of Faith:

- (i) Do you believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth? ...
- (ii) Do you believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died and was buried, rose from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father? ...
- (iii) Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting?

This pre-Baptismal formula, going right back to the early Church, is an interrogatory form of basic Christian belief that also came to be expressed in a declaratory form instead as a 'Creed.' The two forms developed side by side as a way of stating one's Christian credentials, especially during catechesis for receiving the Sacraments of Initiation. Credal formulae are *innumerable*, starting from the 1st & 2nd centuries, early theologians and synods, in both the East and the West, gradually becoming more elaborate and precise. The Creed which we profess at Sunday Mass still has that clear structure of 3-fold

Baptismal profession, doesn't it? We either use the shorter *Apostles Creed*, developed in Rome from about the 4th c., or the longer *Nicene Creed* (the *Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed*) agreed on by the bishops present at the 1st Ecumenical Council of 325AD in Nicaea and expanded at the 2nd Council, in Constantinople, in 381AD. Now, there's a link with this Holy Year 2025, as Pope Francis explicitly mentions in his convoking of the Jubilee, in its being providentially the 17th centenary of the Council of Nicaea:

The Council of Nicaea sought to preserve the Church's unity, which was seriously threatened by the denial of the full divinity of Jesus Christ and hence his consubstantiality with the Father. Some three hundred bishops took part, convoked at the behest of the Emperor Constantine; their first meeting took place in the Imperial Palace on 20th May 325. After various debates, by the grace of the Spirit they unanimously approved the Creed that we still recite each Sunday at the celebration of the Eucharist. ...

The Council of Nicaea was a milestone in the Church's history. The celebration of its anniversary invites Christians to join in a hymn of praise and thanksgiving to the Blessed Trinity and in particular to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, "consubstantial with the Father," who revealed to us that mystery of love. (*Spes non Confundit*, n. 17)

The Council of Nicaea took the chance to define a Creed, a formula drawn from earlier Church traditions but expressed with great accuracy of vocabulary to pin down an orthodox Christian understanding of God's inner being as the Holy

Trinity. This was to safeguard Church unity, at a time so threatened by heresy. The newly-converted emperor, Constantine, was keen to avoid having his empire torn apart by theological wars; hence the historical significance of this Council, and the one which followed 56yrs later and which refined that Nicene Creed for us. As part of our keeping this Holy Year, then, my idea is that, between now and early Lent, I would like to take the Nicene Creed's articles, and unpack its riches. This springs so perfectly out of today's feast, and the tri-partite formula of Baptism and Baptismal promises, ... so we shall start right now!

We begin: *I believe in one God, the Father Almighty.* Even in this first short phrase, we are taken up into the great mystery and glory of everything we believe in: that there is one God, who is Almighty and Eternal, one Mind who is the source of everything that is. A crucial part of God's revelation to Israel was the fact that He is *the one and only God*. We heard in Dt 6 a few Sundays before Christmas, the very heart of the Old Testament: *Listen, Israel: the Lord our God is the one Lord.* Israel was

surrounded by pagan nations that believed in many (false) gods. The great pagan religions of Greece and Rome in Europe had accepted a plethora of gods and goddesses, with their religious myths that describe their getting up to all sorts! India's ancient Hindu religions had believed in a multiplicity of gods. But Israel was taught something very different. The unique strand in the belief of the Jews was that there is *one and only one God*. When He revealed Himself to Moses in the wilderness, at the burning bush, Moses asked Him for a name by which to call Him — and God obliged, saying to Moses that He was to be known as 'YHWH,' which means simply, '*I Am Who Am.*' Is this a name, or is this is refusal to give a name? Well, in a way it is both. What it does express is that God is the *source of all existence*: that He is the One who gives being. Everything 'is' only because He 'is.' All the rest of Israel's faith follows on from this basic ground of belief: that God is One; He is the One Lord.

Christianity, of course, flows directly out of the Jewish faith. All that God revealed to them, was a

preparation for Christ; a getting-ready for the Christian faith. So, nothing that God revealed to the Jews can be in contradiction to what we believe as Christians. Above all, of course, this includes that God is one and only one. When we as Christians acknowledge Jesus as the Lord; and the Holy Spirit also as ‘the Lord, the Giver of Life,’ we are not contradicting our faith in the One God. God is One; but that is not all there is to be said: God is one God, but He is also Three Persons, whom we call the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We have not made up these names for them: *they are the names given by Jesus Himself*. Before Jesus, we knew God to be One, but did not know Him to be three persons. Jesus, the Son of God, has shown this to us. He refers to God as ‘The Father;’ He makes it clear that He also is God, God the Son; and He also makes it clear that the Holy Spirit, coming from the Father and the Son is God too. Each is God, truly: together they are the one and only God; all that they do is one: there is no dispute or division between them. Even so, there are distinctions: only the Son has taken on flesh and been born as a human being in

order to unite God with His human creation.

To speak of God as ‘Father’ was not unknown of in the Old Testament, but it was not the most common way to refer to Him. More common was to address Him as ‘the Most High,’ the ‘Holy One of Israel’ etc. *It is with Jesus’s coming amongst us*, speaking to us the very words of God Himself, that we are led to find in the name ‘Father’ the most fitting title for God. Jesus spoke always of God as His Father, and invited us also to pray ‘Our Father’ together with Him. So, as the *Catechism* says:

Jesus revealed that God is Father in an unheard-of sense: he is Father not only in being Creator; he is eternally Father by his relationship to his only Son who, reciprocally, is Son only in relation to his Father: “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” (CCC 240)

In Jesus, then, we have been allowed to understand so much more intimately the inner life of God Himself, who is *a community of persons*, three-in-one, three persons loving and then reaching out in the creation and salvation of mankind: teaching us how to love as they are love Itself.