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PART 1

The Profession of Faith

The simple declarative sentence “Jesus is Lord” is itself a miniature creed, that is, a statement or profession of one’s beliefs. The Church has issued some official creeds, most notably the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed, both of which expressed the faith of the early Christian communities. *Their* faith remains *our* faith today.

The word *creed* comes from the Latin *Credo*, which means “I believe.” But what Christians really proclaim is “We believe.” We do not invent our own faith; we receive it from God through the Church. As the Hippocratic oath binds doctors into a community of healers, so our recitation of the Creed unites us to our brothers and sisters in the faith.

For centuries, Catholics have been professing their faith in the Triune God by proclaiming the Nicene Creed. This creed clearly formulates essential Christian doctrines about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, the Church, salvation, and human destiny. It resulted after decades of controversy begun by a learned Egyptian priest, Arius, who denied that Jesus, the Son, always existed with the Father. In effect, Arius denied Jesus’ divinity.

The raging Arian controversy caused extreme dissension in the Church. As a result, the Emperor Constantine convoked the first general or ecumenical council at Nicaea in 325. It was the first of twenty-one such councils in the Church’s rich history. A major achievement of this council was to declare clearly the divinity of Jesus by issuing the Nicene Creed. The second ecumenical council, the Council of Constantinople (381), endorsed and expanded this creed. It has served well as a summary of Catholic faith ever since.

This section will examine the individual articles of the Nicene Creed as our profession of faith.

CHAPTER ONE

The Existence of God

At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror,
but then face to face. At present I know partially;
then I shall know fully, as I am fully known.

—1 Corinthians 13:12

Every thinking, feeling human being at some time or other has an awesome experience, one that shakes the very ground he or she walks on. It is at such times that most of us tend to turn to God, to wonder about that hidden presence that we have somehow sensed. These experiences force us to ask questions about the meaning of life . . . and death. Why are we here? Why is there suffering? Why do our loved ones and we have to die? What is the meaning of love?

Our Catholic faith provides us with tremendous hope when reflecting on questions like these. It teaches us that an infinitely loving God created us to share in his own life, calling us to seek, to know, and to love him. God is always drawing close to us, inviting us into the unity of his family, the Church.

To accomplish this, when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son as Redeemer and Savior. In his Son and through him, he invites all people to become, in the Holy Spirit, his adopted children and thus heirs of his blessed life (CCC 1).

This chapter takes up two issues: questions of God's existence and how God has communicated with humanity.

Is It Normal to Believe in God? (CCC 27–30; 44–45)

The heavy questions that strike us as we travel through life often force us to face the issue of God's existence. Most people conclude that God exists, even though no one can see God. They are like the little boy who flew a kite so high that it soared into some low-flying clouds. A passerby asked the boy how he knew the kite was still up in the sky. The boy told the inquisitor to put his hand on the string

and feel the pull of the unseen kite. God's existence and presence are like this. We may not see God face-to-face, but we can feel God's tug on our hearts. This tug reveals that we are religious beings by nature; we seek God and we allow God to seek us.

Not everyone in our world agrees, however. For example, atheists, for various reasons, deny God's existence. Some, who trust only in material reality, claim God cannot be experienced with the senses; hence, for them, God does not exist. Others hold that belief in God downgrades what it means to be human; for them, humanity is the only god. Still others reject the notion of God because they find the suffering and evil in the world incompatible with the existence of a supreme and loving being. And, in truth, some are atheists because they do not want a religion and its God telling them how to behave, perhaps urging them to change an irresponsible, selfish, or immoral lifestyle.

Between the believers and the atheists are the agnostics, who claim that we cannot know for certain if there is a God or not. Hence, they decide not to decide. The question of the existence of God makes little practical difference in their lives.

Atheists and agnostics—and also self-named believers who are in fact indifferent to spiritual realities—challenge believers to reflect more deeply on their own faith and why they believe in God.

Does God Exist? (CCC 31–32; 34–35; 47)

In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul teaches that we can discover God's existence by reflecting on the things God has made (Rom 1:18–21). The Catholic Church also teaches that human reason can know with certainty the existence of God from creation.

St. Paul and Church teaching do not claim that each and every person can and does come to a knowledge of God's existence through reason. Rather, they assert that humans are rationally able to discover the hidden God because "ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made" (Rom 1:20). Belief in God is not unreasonable or foolish as some nonbelievers claim.

Some of the arguments for the existence of God include personal experience, common human experience, human history, and demonstrations based on reason.

What Does Personal Experience Tell Us about God? (CCC 27–30; 33; 46)

Our own experience can guide us to God. Our feelings of dependency, our sense of wonder and awe and joy, our feelings of being invited and called to do greater things than we are doing right now—all of these may speak of a God who has made us to discover him. When we reflect on ourselves as something very special in creation, we are given some strong insights that help us conclude there is a Creator who brought us into existence. The following are traditional arguments for the existence of God. One of them may strike a response with you.

An unquenchable thirst for happiness. We all want to be happy. We spend a lot of our time and energy trying to do things and acquire things that we think will make us happy. Yet our happiness fades and we soon find ourselves desiring something else. Are we creatures doomed to be ultimately frustrated? We want happiness, but the more we pursue it, the more it seems to slip away.

Can it be that a Creator made us with a hunger for happiness, which nothing in this world can completely satisfy? Might it be that God implanted in us a kind of homing device that causes us to be restless until we find him? This restlessness for *total* happiness points to a Supreme Being who made us this way, with a keen desire for God implanted in our hearts. God made us for himself and always attracts us to him. In the words of St. Augustine, “You are great, Lord, . . . because you have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you” (*Confessions*, 1.1.1).

Sense of justice. Have you ever felt that the evil people of the world will someday be called to task? It seems unfair that cheaters and liars and killers often prosper in this life while some good people suffer and are taken advantage of. We have a fundamental feeling that things will be reversed someday, that there is a “power” that will right all wrongs, if not in this life, then in the next.

Love. How can we explain the greatest reality known to us, the sense of being cared for and loved? Love is a spiritual reality that is not explained by the material universe. It must come from somewhere, ultimately from love itself, the being we call God. (The same can be said for intelligence; it must ultimately come from intelligence itself, God.)

The human person. Christians believe that the human person is made in God's image and likeness. Our openness to truth and beauty, our sense of moral goodness, our ability to love, even at great personal cost—all these reveal a spiritual depth to humans. They point to the existence of a soul, "the seed of eternity" God implants in us. The capacity for these spiritual activities, rooted in the soul, can have their origin only in a spiritual being of infinite Goodness, a being we call God who has created humans in his own image and likeness.

What Does Our Common Experience Tell Us about God? (CCC 51–53)

From the earliest times, human beings have testified to the existence of God. An overwhelming majority of cultures has believed in some being who is greater than any of its members. There have been atheistic governments that denied God, but many of the people in those countries still held fast to a belief in God.

One can argue that such an observation does not prove that there is a God. Yet it is still very convincing that the common human experience has acknowledged a God who unites, heals, and preserves the human race.

People have not agreed on the exact nature of this superior being or how many of these beings there may be. Some picture a vengeful, spiteful god. Others see a remote figure, like a clockmaker who constructs his masterpiece but is then quite content to allow it to run by itself. Still others imagine a capricious god, one who toys with and torments his creatures.

Disagreement on what God is like does not disprove God's existence, however. These differences merely show that, left to our own clouded intellects, we cannot perceive God clearly. We know *someone* is there, but God's true identity is not crystal clear to us using our minds alone. We need God's direct help if we are to know God as God really is.

What Does Reason Tell Us about God? (CCC 31–32; 46)

St. Thomas Aquinas, the great medieval theologian, summed up five so-called proofs for the existence of God. They all come down

to affirming that we can discover God by looking at movement, becoming, contingency, order, and beauty in the world (CCC 32). For example, Aquinas points out that everything we know of in existence was caused by something or someone else. There has to be a source that was the first cause—an uncaused cause that logically always existed. This first cause the philosophers call God. The other arguments are similar.

Our own personal reflection on the beauty, immensity, symmetry, and power of creation can give us an awareness of a God who made all things and keeps them in existence. Alfred North Whitehead once said that God is the poet of the world. God's lyricism can be discovered in truth, beauty, and goodness. Our reflections and experiences of awe and wonder point to the existence of God.

Does God Communicate with Us? (CCC 51)

Christians believe not only that God exists, but also that God freely, lovingly, and graciously communicated himself to us. As the Second Vatican Council taught: "In His goodness and wisdom, God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of his will by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man has access to the Father in the Holy Spirit and comes to share in the divine nature" (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 2).

What Is Divine Revelation? (CCC 50–54)

Christians believe in Divine Revelation. What do we mean by this important term? First, we must emphasize that God is primarily a mystery; God's ways are above our ways, and God's thoughts are above our thoughts. God is totally other; no human words, no human thoughts can totally explain who God is. In a certain sense, God is hidden behind a veil. As we have seen, though, we can use our minds to figure out that there must be a God who made everything and keeps it in existence. And by studying carefully what God has made, we can say some things about him. For example, when we look at the vastness of the universe, we must conclude that the one who made it is an infinite being, that is, one who is not limited. Or when we reflect on the existence of intelligent life in the universe, we are led to conclude that the Creator himself must be an intelligent being to the *n*th degree, an all-knowing being who is the very source of human intelligence.

Basically, we can conclude that God is a perfect being who is in no way limited like the creatures God has made. God goes beyond all creatures. But we must remember that human reason alone can only give us a veiled or clouded knowledge of God. One conclusion from this is to realize that our images of God are limited and imperfect. We must not confuse our images of God with the incomprehensible, invisible, infinite God.

Yet, Christians believe that God freely chose to communicate himself and his plan for our salvation to his creatures. This free gift of God's self-communication is known as supernatural or **Divine Revelation**. Literally, *revelation* means "unveiling." We believe that out of the abundance of his love, God unveiled himself in human history and speaks to us as friends, lives among us, and invites us into fellowship with him. We call this revelation supernatural because we, as God's creatures, do not have a natural right to this intimate friendship with God. God's self-disclosure, God's invitation to a deeper life of love, is purely a gift on God's part.

At many moments in the past and by many means, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our time, the final days, he has spoken to us in the person of his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the ages (Heb 1:1–2).

What Is Salvation History? (CCC 54–67)

The story of God's self-disclosure, God's saving action in history, is known as **salvation history**. The story of God's generous love began with the creation of our first parents. After their fall, God promised to redeem us and gave hope of eternal life to the human race. God's abiding love revealed itself in covenant—loving agreements between God and humans. For example, in the **covenant** with Noah after the Flood, God immediately began to reach out to the divided peoples with the goal of eventually uniting all people in Christ our Lord.

A profound event in God's plan was the covenant with Abraham and the creation of the nation of Israel. Through the patriarchs, the founding fathers of Israel, and Moses, through whom God revealed the divine law, God taught the people of Israel to acknowledge him as the one true God. Through prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, God gave Israel hope for salvation: a future Messiah who would write a new covenant in the hearts of all humans. The poor

and humble, whose dependence on God was shown beautifully in the life of Mary the Mother of God, bear this hope in a special way.

Salvation history reached its high point in the coming of Jesus Christ, the fullness of God's Revelation. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, the Son, who lived among us, taught us in human words and deeds about his Father, and completed the Father's work of salvation. Jesus is God's final Word; God has no other word to give us. To see Jesus is to see the Father.

How Do We Learn of Salvation History? (CCC 74–87; 101–114; 121–125; 134–141)

The story of salvation history lives on in Sacred Scripture (the Bible) and in the **Sacred Tradition** of the Christian community. The **Bible** is the written record of Revelation and contains the inspired testimony of people like the prophets and Apostles about God's marvelous deeds in human history. "Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit" (*Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 9). This means that God inspired the human authors of the Bible to use their talents to write what God wanted written, and nothing more.

The Hebrew Scriptures (contained in the Old Testament) record God's teaching to the Jewish people and God's interactions in their history. They tell how God called the Chosen People out of Egypt into the Promised Land, how they became a nation and a religious community, and how they grew to know and worship the one true God. An indispensable part of Divine Revelation, the Old Testament provides significant teaching about God, sound wisdom for living a good life, and a rich legacy of prayer. Further, it contains in a hidden way the mystery of our salvation.

The New Testament chronicles the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and announces the Good News of God's plan of salvation for all people everywhere. The Gospels are the heart of the Bible because they are the prime source of our knowledge about Jesus' life and teaching.

Sacred Tradition hands on God's Word, first given to the Apostles by the Lord and the Holy Spirit, to the successors of the Apostles (the bishops and pope). Enlightened by the Holy Spirit, these successors faithfully preserve, explain, and spread it to the ends of the earth. Through this living Sacred Tradition, "the Church, in her

teaching, life, and worship perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes" (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 8). Catholics accept and honor equally both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition as two modes of God's transmission of **Revelation**.

What Is Our Response to God's Communication? (CCC 26; 91–100; 142–144)

God's self-communication and plan for us require a response on our part. That response is known as **faith**, a commitment of our whole lives to a loving God and a resounding "yes" to the truths God has shared with us in Christ our Lord. The Letter to the Hebrews defines faith as the "realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen" (Heb 11:1).

Where Do We Get Faith? (CCC 145–171)

Faith, like Revelation, is a free gift of God. Through the action of the Holy Spirit, the gift of faith enables us to submit our wills and intellects to God. Faith is also a virtue that attracts us to God the Father. It binds us to God in a love relationship, giving us conviction, commitment, and trust with regard to realities that we can neither see nor clearly prove.

Faith enables us to accept Jesus as Lord. It equips us to live his life of loving service in the Catholic Church. It empowers us to believe the truths God has revealed because God revealed them.

And faith in Jesus enables us to share in the life of the Holy Spirit, who reveals to us who Jesus is. Thus Christian faith proclaims belief in one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Although faith is a gift from God by which the Holy Spirit empowers us to live and believe Divine Revelation, our response is only human if it is free. Thus, no one can be forced to embrace faith against his or her will. Faith involves a *free* human act, in which our minds and our hearts cooperate with divine grace.

We can look to Abraham and Mary as two scriptural models of faith. In obedience to God, Abraham left his homeland to become a stranger and pilgrim in a promised land. Through his fidelity, God created a people and prepared the way for the Messiah. The Blessed Mother's entire life exhibited a steadfast "yes" to God. Her

faithfulness helped fulfill in a sublime way God's work of salvation through her Son, Jesus Christ.

Finally, Catholics recognize that faith is an act of the Church. The Church's faith comes before, gives life to, supports, and nourishes the faith of the individual, God's gift to us. As John's Gospel teaches, faith in the Son leads to eternal life; disobedience to his word leads to the wrath of God (Jn 3:36).

Concluding Reflections

We began this chapter with the question of God's existence, and we end with faith. St. Anselm of Canterbury had it right: "For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand."

It is reasonable to believe in God. Personal experiences, universal human belief, human history, and rational reflection all point to a supreme being who has made our universe and keeps it in existence.

Christian belief does not stop with the fact of God's existence. This is only the beginning. God has revealed himself to us not only through the stamp of a creative touch on those things we can observe, but also by getting involved in human history. God formed a people and through them gave to the human community the Word, the Son, Jesus Christ.

Who is this God for you? How do you perceive God's existence? How does God speak to you through the material world? Have you discovered God through Christian Revelation?

Prayer Reflection

"Stop and smell the roses" is common but sound advice. We can never be so preoccupied on our faith journey that we miss seeing God in the beautiful creation he has made.

Reflection on creation moves the believer to adoration and praise. Both Jews and Christians turn to the Psalms for inspiration in addressing the almighty God.

O LORD, our Lord,
how awesome is your name through all the earth!
I will sing of your majesty above the heavens
with the mouths of babes and infants.