

May 25, 2008
Sunday of the Samaritan Woman

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Mother Church traditionally begins Her instruction of the faithful, not by handing them a Bible, but by teaching them a creed. In the Christian religion, recitation precedes reading. Indeed, we commence with a process of verbal memorization: "Say after me . . ."

A witness to this method, a notable preacher in the fourth century, was St. Cyril of Jerusalem, many of whose instructions to the new converts (or "catechumens," a term to be examined presently) have been transmitted as a part the Church's heritage. Preparing his hearers to be received into the Church by baptism, Cyril first recited the creed for them, directing them exactly what to do with it: "I want you, please, to commit this summary to memory as I recite it. Rehearse it diligently among yourselves. Do not write it down on paper, but use your memory to engrave it on your heart" (*Catechetical Lectures* 5.12).

Several points, I think, should be made with respect to this important instruction:

First, the process did not begin with reading or writing. It was not a literary effort. In fact, writing the creed down was explicitly prohibited. The transmission took shape, rather, by listening and repeating, with a view to learning the content by rote. The material was to go directly from the ear to the mouth; and the memory, thus strengthened, was to grab hold of it in order to fix it in the heart. There was to be an actual sound, a living word, a formula pronounced, heard, repeated, and memorized. The hearers were to be repeaters: "Recite after me . . ."

Indeed, the very term for this process---"catechesis"---means "according to echo." The "catechumen" is literally an "echoer," indicating that the living word resounds (that is, "sounds again") in the ears, is repeated by the tongue, and finally attains a round, full resonance in the heart.

Second, for Cyril this process was not private. It was ideally accomplished, rather, in a group. Since the content of the formula was the very faith of the Church, its proper context was communal. Thus, he instructed his hearers to "rehearse it diligently among yourselves." The personal faith of the hearer---"I believe" (*pistevo* or *credo*, as in Acts 8: 37)---was not an isolated act. The believer received his faith from the Church, through Her preaching and instruction, and he would live it within the Church. Other people, then, were integral to his personal faith and essential to the process by which he came to Christ. Conversion, in short, included conversation.

Third, the Church did not hand over the Holy Scriptures to a person until this catechesis was completed and mature, because such initiatory instruction provided the key to the correct understanding of the Bible. According to the traditional view of the Church, it is a risky business to read the Bible without the creed, or 'rule of faith.' Thus, St. Leo of Rome, writing less than a century after Cyril, affirmed, "Someone without the most basic understanding even of the creed itself can have learned nothing from the sacred texts of the Old and New Testaments" (*The Tome*).

The reluctance of the early Christians to write down the creed is probably the best explanation for its relatively late appearance among the Church's transmitted documents. There were references to the creed before there were copies of it.

In its most primitive form, the creed seems to have been chiefly Christological, based on the formula, "Jesus is Lord" (Acts 2:36; 8:37; 1 Corinthians 8:6; 12:3; Philippians 2:11; Ignatius of Antioch, *Trallians* 9).

However, since baptism itself was done "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19; *Didache* 7), a Trinitarian form of the creed was perfectly logical, inasmuch as the creed's recitation was part of the baptismal rite. Our earliest witness to this development was St. Justin Martyr in the mid-second century (*First Apology* 61).

For the reason we have already considered, the New Testament provides no direct evidence supporting my suspicion that the creed's early development was indebted to Israel's Shema, which affirms the unity of God. Nonetheless, the creed, in its full form given us by the ecumenical councils, still asserts that God is one and Jesus is Lord---the equivalents of *Adonai Eloheinu Adonai 'ehad* and *ho Kyrios Iesus*.

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