

## I believe in a God who.....so do we need a new creed?

By Kerry Gonzales

While we may not be allowed to have jokes in church any more, I think we are probably exempt here, so here goes:

*A person goes up to heaven and St Peter gives the grand tour, pointing out the tennis centre, Golf course, swimming pool, bar and all the other benefits. The new arrival asks St Peter who all the people milling around in groups are. St Peter tells them that some are Muslims, others Presbyterians and also Greek Orthodox. The new arrival then questions St Peter about all the music and laughter coming from behind a barrier. St Peter answers: "Oh don't worry about that; that is just the Catholics; they like to think they are the only ones that have made it up here and God is just too kind hearted to disillusion them".*

That is a joke that I'm sure many of you have heard before. However it illustrates well for me how belief - passionate, rigid belief can often blind us to other truths that are right before our eyes.

In regard to the Catholic Church and Catholic teaching, it is in some ways easier to define what I don't believe rather than what I do. Catholic teaching is simpler to define and these days I am in agreement with the Church on fewer and fewer of its teachings. Having said that however, it is not even a matter of what I don't believe but rather those things that I don't lose any sleep over, and dogma fits into that category. Dogma such as the Virgin Birth, Trinity, Immaculate Conception, Communion of Saints, Transubstantiation, Indulgences and the rest are not things that I argue about. If you believe that's fine, if you don't that's fine too. The question for me is whether I need to believe, whether any Catholic needs to believe those things in order to lead a good Catholic life, faithful to the model and message of Jesus. Personally, I don't think so. Whether I believe such things are true or not, doesn't impact upon the faith that I do have in Jesus, because I live my life according to my conscience, not the dictates of the church. And as much as the hierarchy would like to believe it, my conscience is not uninformed or erroneous, because it is based on so many and varied life experiences, both religious and secular, that I have encountered and learnt from over the years. That is not to say that every choice I make will be right, but it will however be based on a solid foundation.

What we believe is very much a product of the influences that have shaped our development. So to set the scene to talk about what sort of God I believe in and my beliefs in relation to the Catholic Church, I tell you a bit about my early influences.

I really don't need to tell people I grew up a Catholic. I only need to say that I was born in the 1950s and that I have seven brothers and sisters. Must be Catholic. I'm sure there are many of you who grew up Catholic in that era who have had similar experiences to mine - such as sitting in the front row at mass and we took up the whole row; responding mindlessly yet perfectly in Latin; taking communion at the altar rails by mouth; family rosary and prayer; mass very often; weekly confession; adoration of the cross; incense; nuns in habits; priestly visits to the home; Catholic

schools; youth group; Catholic friends. I'm sure you get the picture – my whole life was centered around the church and to doubt or question was too scandalous to contemplate. I don't think my family even had any friends who were not Catholic. Mind you, it wasn't my soul that was at risk if I missed mass, it was my physical being I was afraid for if my mother had found out. My own baptism was very indicative of the church of the 1950s as I was not allowed to be baptized Kerry, after county Kerry in Ireland, but instead by my second name Therese after the Little Flower, who was obviously a saint. I don't expect there to be a Saint Kerry any time soon.

Another significant life experience that has impacted on my beliefs is the damage caused by Vatican II. Damage may seem as strange word, yet I can't think of a better one to describe the sense of hope that emanated in the aftermath of V2 that has slowly but systematically be crushed in the intervening years. As such I am one of the many Catholics who had great expectations of and for the church who are now disillusioned by the way the church is fleeing backwards to a pre- V2 mode of thinking and operation. So Vatican II, which should have been a very positive influence on my beliefs, has ultimately had a much more negative effect. I realize that Vatican II itself is not the culprit here, but the result is still the same.

Earlier in the year I watched an SBS documentary called *Religious Right at the Crossroads* on the role of the conservative evangelical Christians in the election of Barak Obama. Historically US evangelical Christians are Republican voters yet over 60% of the 3 ½ million young evangelicals voted for the Democrat Obama. The catalyst for such an unprecedented move was the belief of the young people that the stance of the religious right was too narrow and too negative. While they still were staunchly against abortion and homosexuality they were also looking for leadership that could encompass important issues such as poverty, AIDs and the environment. Such young Christians saw themselves as citizens of the world rather than people bound by rigid religious practice. These young Christians were not only effecting great change within US politics but within their own religious communities as well. This for me is a great example of how even staunchly religious people can change and grow without loosing the important foundations that they hold dear. Unfortunately for the Catholic Church we have few young people to drive such change.

So to a Creed – do we need one or even want one?

The Merriam Webster dictionary tells us that the word CREED comes from the:

Latin *credo*, from *credere* to believe, trust, entrust; and means:

- 1: a brief authoritative formula of religious belief
- 2: a set of fundamental beliefs; *also* : a guiding principle (Merriam Webster)

I tend more towards the 2<sup>nd</sup> meaning as it feels less rigid, but is also open to many more possibilities than is an “authoritative formula”.

Within the Catholic Church the first use of a creed was for baptism, where the adult being baptized, acknowledged the beliefs that had led them to seek baptism. Over time however this acknowledgement of belief became a “Rule of Faith” and

ultimately a measure of determining suitability for inclusion in the Catholic Community. Even today there are many instances where the creed is being used as a way for individuals to prove their faith and conformity to the Church's dogma. When a holocaust denying Bishop can be welcomed back into the Church (admittedly without Episcopal authority) because he can acknowledge the creed, it says to me that there is something really wrong with the church at the highest levels and the creed itself as neither appear to reflect any real understanding of how the model of Jesus would be truly present in such a situation.

Interesting also was the early Church's use of the Greek word "hairesis" or "heresy" meaning a "school of thought or preferred doctrine". It seems that historically heretics were a valued part of the community, as they helped the group to understand more about themselves and what they believed in. Today of course, the word heretic is used often by the Church, but not in a positive way. The term places the person outside the community, with the understanding that their beliefs are at best confused, more likely wrong. Not only that, however, as they need to be kept apart so that they don't taint the orthodox members of the community.

The creed should never have been used as a weapon to support hierarchical power, and according to Leonardo Boff the use of this power bears little resemblance to the example of Jesus:

In 1992 he said "My personal experience of dealing over the last 20 years with doctrinal power is this: it is cruel and merciless; it forgets nothing; forgives nothing; it exacts a price for everything" (Leonardo Boff – 1992).

For myself, there came a time when I could no longer say the words of the creed. I could not, in good faith, profess things that I had probably never believed. Such words are quite distant from the faith that I do proclaim. Of course, I knew the words by heart, but when I consciously chose to mean what I was saying, I couldn't do it. For me the current Creed we proclaim does not speak of things I can take to heart, let alone understand. Of course, as many of us have done all our lives we can take these creedal statements on faith and just say them. They are not for me however a profession of faith, or a basis for how I live my life. Such words as begotten, incarnate, proceeds from the father and the son, one holy Catholic and apostolic, one baptism for the forgiveness of sins don't assist in the deepening of my relationship with God, my fellow travellers or the world around me. At some point in history they may have meant more to the faithful, but today the creed needs to be so much more.

The creed as it is talks of belief but not responsibility. For me a creed needs not only to proclaim what I believe about God and perhaps the Church, but also must include my own responsibilities in regard to making these beliefs real, in my own time and place. A creed does not need to be too specific, but rather, like a mission statement, it lays a foundation on which communities of faith can build their own practices while still reflecting the principles of that creed. We can then perhaps have one creed that is invoked in a variety of ways, dependant on the needs, resources and cultural understanding inherent in a church that touches millions of people worldwide. Then perhaps the church could truly be universal.

To be relevant a creed also needs to speak to individuals. This doesn't mean that it doesn't encompass the foundational beliefs of the entire family of believers, but it must be relevant, on some level, to everyone. In the mass our penitential rite has us using the first person "I". Yet when we reach the creed we have moved on to a communal "we". Using the plural, for me, abrogates the responsibility and spreads the need for action to the group as a whole. This may not be the intent, but it can be the result. Each person "gathered in his name" should feel able to say, with conviction, that "I" believe. Without that individual commitment, I feel the creed loses its ability to transform.

There is no doubt that as a Church and as individuals we do need to be able to articulate a creed. Such a creed helps us to define ourselves and provides guidance for us on the journey. Yet, such a creed needs to be a strong reflection of where we have come from, where we are now and what we strive for. It should also not be set in concrete, as in reflecting the church that we are and strive to become, it needs to incorporate contemporary understandings and experience. I don't mean something that necessarily incorporates every new idea and fashion, but a creed must remain open to the message of the spirit in all times, all people and all places. A creed should never be imposed or used as a tool of judgment or exclusion. As people of God our human frailty means that we will often not live up to our individual or community beliefs, but as God's children we trust that we will always be accepted and nurtured at each and every point in our journey. I believe that Jesus confirms this for us all.

So while I may not be able to say many of the words of the official creed, I can still say that I do believe.

So if I had to formulate something called a creed, it would be simple and go something like this:

I believe in a god who is love, therefore I must exemplify that love.  
I believe in a god who embraces, therefore I must open my heart to all people.  
I believe in a god who leads, therefore I must be prepared to follow.  
I believe in a god who challenges, therefore I must grow.