



## Diocese of Cairns

### Reflections on the Trinity Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> June 2011

Since writing to you last week about the changes in our responses at Mass, I may have caught a writing *bug* or become suddenly addicted to the habit.

However this is Trinity Sunday when we reflect on the Mystery of God: One in Three. This is difficult to explain clearly and briefly, yet it is the very centre of our Christian faith and life.

The new translation of the Nicene Creed has another noticeable change in wording: beyond that from *We* to *I believe*, which I wrote about last week. When proclaiming faith in the Lord Jesus there is now a change from *of one being* to *consubstantial with the Father*: One big new (or very old) word *consubstantial* replaces three seemingly simpler words *of one being*!

Why this change? Well it is more faithful to the Latin *consubstantialem Patri* and the Greek original *homoousios*. From where on earth, though, (and it was from earth, as it is a non-biblical word) did this strange mouth-full come?

It may be helpful quickly to cover the history, the story, of what we as Christians say we believe.

Jesus' own intimacy and unity with the Father is most clearly stated in His own words in John's Gospel:

*The Father and I are one.*

*... the Father is in me and I am in the Father. (10/30 & 38)*

For the first Christians their faith in this utter uniqueness of Jesus was captured in the seemingly simple phrase: *Jesus is Lord*. (Rom 10/9 & 1 Cor. 12/3) *Lord/Adonai* was reserved as the reverential form of address for God Alone, because the Divine Name Itself - *the "Y" word* could never be uttered. (The *Jehovah* of older English translations of the Scriptures is a hybrid with the vowels of *Adonai* placed between the consonants of the *Y word*.)

The earliest Baptismal formula was ... *baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* (Matt 28-19). This reflected God as a Trinity of Persons, but this was before the word Trinity itself was devised. (It was used first by Theophilus (= God lover) of Antioch cAD 180.)

The Baptismal Creed (as we repeat it also in the Easter Vigil) is the earliest detailed formulation of Christian belief. It reflects the Lord's original call to repentance and conversion, which is repeated in the Ash Wednesday liturgy; *Repent and believe in the Good News*. (Mk 1/15)

The Rite of Baptism, within our communion with the Roman Church, has remained unaltered since earliest times. It has the threefold rejection of sin and Satan:

1. *Do you reject sin, so as to live in the freedom of God's children? I do.*
2. *Do you reject the glamour of evil, and refuse to be mastered by sin? I do.*
3. *Do you reject Satan, father of sin and prince of darkness? I do.*

Then follows the threefold profession of Christian Faith:

1. *Do you believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth? I do.*
2. *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? I do.*
3. *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? I do.*

This developed into the Apostles Creed, which was used in the Church at Rome from so early that its exact date of formulation has been lost in the mists of time.

This Apostles Creed may now be used rather than the longer (and less ancient) Nicene Creed to which we have become accustomed. Compare these Creeds, the Apostles and the Nicene, on our white laminated sheets. Obviously the Apostles Creed is shorter and simpler. It says all that needed to be said in simple language. It is a brief summary of biblical history – from God’s Creating (Gen. I & II) to the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. (Acts II) Then follows the practical teachings from the New Testament writings:

- The Church (Mt. 16/18) – the assembly – the *Body* - of the Faithful – the Sheepfold (John 10)
- The communion of saints: that *witnesses in a great cloud on every side of us* (Hebrews 12/1 & John 15)
- Forgiveness - reconciliation from sinfulness (John 20/23)
- The resurrection of the body: (John 11/26)
- Life everlasting. *I am going to prepare a place for you.* (John 14:2)

While the essence of our faith is unchangeable, the need for doctrinal precision develops across history.

The Nicene Creed was formulated at the first major Council of the Church, with about three hundred bishops gathered in AD 325 in what is now a Turkish town. Because most of them were from the East, they adopted the Baptismal Creed used in the Church of Jerusalem, essentially (even *substantially!*) the same, though somewhat longer in expression, than that of the Church of Rome.

However in moving several centuries away from Apostolic/New Testament times, debates and disputes developed about the understanding of Jesus’ relationship or role within the Godhead. This happened partly because of cultural and language shifts. The Christian faith grew and spread away from its Jewish, biblical roots. When the Faith encountered other mindsets – confusions became common with different categories of understanding and varying manners of expressing (now in Greek and Latin) the same basic beliefs.

Here for the first time that non-biblical term of *consubstantial* makes its appearance in a Christian Creed: Christ Jesus is *begotten, not made* (= *not created*), *consubstantial with the Father*. (Note *Christ* is from the *substance* of the *Father*, not from the *substance* of the Godhead.) God as Father is logically prior to God as Son. Yet *Father* itself is the substratum of The Divinity: The One God-living and true. This is that Oneness of God, the common ground shared by Christianity, Judaism and Islam. This mono (one) theistic God is the One God of the Hebrew Scriptures: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Uniquely Jesus, the eternal Word incarnate, reveals God intimately as *Father – Abba*. This is a closeness, a familiarity unimaginable and ever scandalous in Islam certainly and to some degree even for Judaism.

All of this though may seem rather too complicated and mere academic disputing over words and what they mean. Yet it is crucial to our life of faith and our love of and from God.

St Athanasius (AD 296-373), who was present and powerful at the Council of Nicaea, and became bishop of Alexandria (North Africa) three years later in AD 328, reflected that, if Christ is not divine, He can neither save nor make us like God: *God became human that we might become God*. Earlier St. Irenaeus (AD 130-200) the bishop of Lyons (southern France) had expressed this even more intimately: *Because of His immeasurable love God became what we are, that He might fit us for what He is*.

So this unfamiliar term *consubstantial* is not just another odd technical word. It helps to clarify and shed light on nothing less than the very *Word of God* among us!

+James Foley  
**BISHOP OF CAIRNS**