

# Refreshing Our Faith 3: Tradition

## The Nicene – Constantinopolitan Creed

We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one being with the Father.  
Through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven:  
by the power of the Holy Spirit  
he was born of the Virgin Mary,  
and became man.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered, died, and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory  
to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son].  
With the Father and the Son  
he is worshipped and glorified.  
He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come. AMEN.

Hopefully by now you remember my mantra about faith beginning with experience. And that experiences we share with others across generations and communities are core human experiences, which are worthy of reflection, discussion and documentation. As Christians, we believe that the core human experience is the experience of Jesus, the full revelation of God.

Catholic Christians believe that revelation is documented in two ways: Scripture and Tradition. Scripture was the first documentation of our experience of God. But once the Scriptures were written, people didn't just stop having any more experiences of Jesus Christ or insights about Him. To the contrary, our faith is a living faith and our experiences and insights around Jesus Christ continue, age after age, right up until the present. So once the Scriptures were solidified into a canon to be changed no more, people needed a way to document the ongoing experience of God sharing Himself with us as a people. And it's this post-Scriptural record of our experiences and insights about God that we call Tradition.

Now you might remember from last week how I talked about different literary styles being present in the Scriptures. How the Scripture writers used a variety of imaginative ways to convey the truth about their experience and understanding of God. On the other hand, Tradition has tended to have a single style: using philosophical statements, called Doctrines and Dogmas, to describe the meaning of God's revelation to us.

Now, before we get too far down the road, let me define some of the words I've been using:

- Doctrines are the documented beliefs of the Church. They are ranked from those beliefs that seem to make sense to those that absolutely make sense. Or to put it another way, there are some doctrines which are strongly *suggested* for Church members to believe and some which are *required* for Church members to believe.
- Dogmas are those second set of doctrines, those core beliefs which are *required* for believing members of the Church. It should not be used in the phrase "Hey, your karma just ran over my dogma."

And since Tradition is the topic of this talk, let's take time to define it, too.

As I said before, our experiences and insights around God's revelation are recoded in 2 ways: Scripture and Tradition. The Scriptural record takes us up to about the year 150, and Tradition takes us up to the present.

Now, there's a definite dependence of our *ongoing* experience of God upon our *previous* experience of God. There's a dependence of Tradition upon Scripture. New experiences cannot contradict old experiences, so Tradition cannot contradict Scriptures. But new experiences can deepen our understanding of old experiences, so Tradition can deepen our understanding of Scripture.

Let me explain this dependence a little better through an example from the Hebrew Scriptures. Remember I briefly talked about how in the Law or Pentateuch that there were 4 different authors, each refining the words and each deepening the message, one after the other, like 4 successive waves polishing the sand on the beach? That worked well when the texts were still being worked out, but once the sections of the Hebrew Scriptures called the Law and Prophets were solidified, you couldn't just go in and revise some parts of them. Instead, Later Historical Books, like 1 and 2 Chronicles, were written and included in the canon of Scriptures. These Later Historical Books were the reflections and insights of later people upon the experiences of an earlier people.

That's a great way to see Tradition. Tradition is the later reflections and insights about our faith that have been collected since the Scriptures were finalized. They get included in our "canon of faith" in a similar manner to how books of the bible were included in the bible: the experience and insight of a people is put together into a statement of belief. That statement of belief is shared across generations and communities. At some point in time, it is generally accepted as speaking authoritatively to the Christian community as a whole. And it is only after this organic process is complete, that it becomes *officially* recognized in the "book of our faith" by the Church as a whole.

To put it together, Tradition is the ongoing reflection by people across generations and communities about the central experience of the Church, Jesus Christ, which leads to statements of belief. The scholar Jaroslav Pelikan has a great saying: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead (meaning the way in which the Church carries its experiences and insights forward in time) and Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living (meaning the way in which some people look exclusively to the past for all their experiences and insights)."

There's a story you've probably heard of a young mother who was preparing her first Christmas ham dinner. After she cut off both ends of the ham, she placed it in a pan for baking. Her friend asked her, "Why did you do that?" And she replied, "I really don't know, but that's the way my mom always did it."

So she asked her mother why she cut off the ends of the ham before baking it, and her mother replied, "I really don't know, but that's the way my mom always did it."

So she asked her grandmother, "Grandma, why is it that you cut off the ends of a ham before you bake it?"

Her grandmother replied, "Well dear, that's the only way it would fit into my baking pan."

The moral of that story is that if we don't understand the context in which something came about, that we'll either start to mimic it for no reason at all or else that we'll be compelled to reject it. Tonight, I want to provide context to many of the beliefs we hold as Catholic Christians so that we can accept them as true based on their merit, rather than simply because our Mother Church has always believed that way. And the way I'm going to do that is that I'm going to intertwine the historical development of our doctrines with stories of exemplary Christians who lived at the time, the saints and martyrs. You know what a saint is don't you? A saint is someone who is perfect and right in the way they live. And a martyr is someone who has to live with a saint.

## **St. Tarcisus**

It was in 258, during the reign of Emperor Valerian, that a decree came forth calling for the death of all Christians. Roman soldiers searched houses for those who would not deny Christ and soon the Roman jails were full of those awaiting their death. The first to die were the priests and bishops, for they had the power to celebrate the Eucharist and provide comfort to the prisoners. It was to this scene that the 13 year old boy, Tarcisus, came. With their priests gone, he understood the desire of the prisoners to receive the Eucharist and so sought out Pope Sixtus II in the catacombs. Popes were a little more approachable then. Sixtus gave Tarcisus his permission to bring the Eucharist to the prisoners. It was a dangerous mission, and as Tarcisus approached the prison, the crowds saw him carefully hiding something in his coat. Accused of hiding the Eucharist, Tarcisus continued on his way, inciting the crowd to further suspect his Christian mission.

I don't know what he thought as he felt the first rock hit him. I don't know if it hit his shoulder, his back, his head. I can imagine he was a little confused that someone would hurt a 13 year old.

I don't know what he thought as he felt the second rock hit him. Did it cut him, stun him, knock him to the ground?

I don't know what he thought as the rest of the rocks hit him. He wasn't trying to be a hero, he was only doing what his heart told him that God's people needed. Why would they want to *hurt* him – he was just a 13 year old boy. But I do suspect that it wasn't long until he realized that they *didn't* want to hurt him – they wanted to *kill* him. So close to his goal, he could see the prisoners crying out for him through the bars of the jail. So close to his goal. Now, Tarcisus, so close to your God.

Early Christians lived in a hostile environment. They were increasingly separated from their Jewish brothers and sisters because of their belief that the Messiah had come. They were persecuted by the Roman government because, like the Jews, they refused to worship the Emperor as a god. During this time, Christians struggled just to gather weekly to celebrate the Eucharist, and they had little time for public debates on the nuances of what they believed. Basically, they focused very little on orthodoxy, which means “right belief”, and focused instead on orthopraxy, which means “right action.”

However, even with persecutions, a whole series of people tried to work out the meaning behind the powerful, but radically new, experience of Jesus.

First, the apostles themselves tried to understand what this whole thing meant regarding their own identity as a people. The history of the Jews was that God established a privileged relationship, the covenant, between the Hebrew people and himself: “you shall be my people and I shall be your God.” But Jesus' message was an expansive message of inclusion. So, at the First Council of Jerusalem, in the year 49, Peter and Paul and the other apostles debated and determined that the Church is for all people, not just Jews. This shattered the Biblical covenant of old, radically shifted the focus of the Church from just the Jewish people to the Gentiles and their thought systems, and recognized that Jesus brings forth a new covenant where all people are God's people.

After that, many different people tried to work out what this whole thing meant regarding their identity as individuals and the identity of God.

In trying to understand how Jesus could be God, a belief system called Gnosticism was called upon (*gnosis* is the Greek word for knowledge, and the Gnostics believed that they had received secret knowledge from God). The Gnostics declared that there were two separate Gods: a good God who created the spiritual world, and a bad God who created the material world. For the Gnostics, the God of Genesis created the material world, and thus was the bad God. Jesus was the Good God, the Spiritual God, and thus, in order to be good, he couldn't have a material body. Instead, his divine spark was released from its bodily confines at His death and that spark is who Jesus really was.

Another belief system, called Manicheism, focused on 3 separate Gods. It believed that just as Jesus was the incarnation of God the Son, so Mani was the incarnation of God the Holy Spirit. He became the Spirit when he was able to liberate himself from the material world.

A third belief system group called Montanism, amplified the implication of the belief that the spiritual is good and the material is bad. They created strict rules around marriage, fasting and martyrdom. Their goal was to remain separated from this world and to welcome the Kingdom by hastening their death, often through willful martyrdom. But their approach was individualistic. The Church wanted to test the prophecies which the Montanists claimed to have had, but the Montanists wanted to determine this on their own.

These 3 systems of belief did not correlate with the larger faith history and experience of the early Christians. They did not speak authoritatively to the experience of the community and thus were rejected through statements which clarified the beliefs of the Church:

- First, the experience of Abraham is that God was one, and later revelation from God can only deepen, not contradict earlier revelation. So Christians affirmed the experience of Jesus and The Holy Spirit as God with a simple statement that God was one and three at the same time, although they couldn't explain how.
- Second, the experience of Jesus' incarnation shows that the material world is good. So Christians affirmed the value of the body, stating that rejecting our bodies to the point of heroic spirituality cannot be the only path to fulfillment.
- Third, the experience of Jesus is that God's revelation is public, not secret. So Christians affirmed that statement that God came to share Himself with all people, stating that elite or individualistic interpretations of truths violated the need for experiences to be shared across generations and communities before they could be seen as authoritative. They said that the Church as a whole needed to determine the validity of truths.

Little by little a body of beliefs was being formed in reaction to extreme positions, and they were also being formed in reaction to the challenges of the persecutions.

During the persecution of Decius, about 250, everyone was required to recant their faith and pay homage to the emperor, which many did rather than suffer martyrdom. At the end of his reign, the persecution ended, but the Church had a problem. How should those who recanted their faith be treated? Some said they could *not* be forgiven. Others said they *could* be forgiven. And still others said they could just be welcomed back in the Church without any *need* for forgiveness.

During the persecution of Diocletian, about 300, priests were forced to hand over their liturgical books, ending their ability to celebrate mass, or face death, which again many did rather than suffer martyrdom. At the end of the persecution, the Church had a similar problem: could those who handed over their books be forgiven? Could they ever validly celebrate the sacraments again? Should they even be allowed to be priests anymore?

By the way, we all know that the persecution of Christians eventually ended, but do you know *why* the Roman Coliseum went out of business? Because the lions ate up all the prophets.

These issues of failure in the face of persecution caused two responses:

- First, in coming to terms with human failure, the Church reiterated that humans are not perfect, and emphasized that God can forgive those who trespass against him. The Church, like Jesus, should not reject sinners, but should encourage them to sin no more. The Church chose not to be filled with perfect people but with those who failed and sinned.
- Second, in coming to terms with the wide variety of opinions on these issues, the Church recognized the need for clear leadership and re-emphasized the authority of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, over the dioceses of the Church in order to sustain the need for unity.

This early period of the Church was a cauldron of debate around a lot of forming topics, especially the Trinity, the balance of the spiritual and material, the authority of the Church, and the loving nature of God.

**St. Augustine** was born in Africa in 354. He was well educated and went to college in Greece. During those college years, he traveled extensively, dabbling in different schools of non-orthodox thought. How different is he from any of us. How different is he from any of our children who have gone off on their own. Augustine enjoyed his wild life, even though he clearly heard the call of God. He knew how God wanted him to live, and he even prayed “Make me chaste and self-restrained, but not yet!” His mother, Monica, prayed earnestly for him and continued to pester him to more fully live his faith. How different is she from any of us. How different is she from any parent who feels responsible for their children, regardless of their age. One day, while contemplating his life, he heard a child in the next house, chanting “take up and read” over and over again. In response, he opened the Bible ready to accept the first words that he read and changed his life that day, lamenting “Too late have I loved you, O Beauty, so ancient and so new, too late have I loved you.” He shifted from being a teacher of rhetoric to a scholar of the church, living like a monk, even after being selected as Bishop of Hippo. He is considered one of the foremost theologians of the Church. Yet despite all his brilliance, his resounding chord has nothing to do with thinking, it has to do with believing: “Our heart is restless, O God, until it rest in you.”

In 314, everything changed for the Church. In that year, the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and ended the persecution of the Church. Christianity moved from being an ill-treated, underground movement, to the religion of the head of state, and eventually, to the official religion of the state. In one sense it was a blessing for the Church because it allowed Christians to discuss their faith publicly and to gather to express that faith. In another sense, it was a curse, because it caused the Church and state to be identified with each other and it allowed people to become more lax in their belief. Both issues would later come back to haunt the Church.

With the persecutions over, the public debate about the experience of Jesus exploded.

One of the people who grappled this issue was Arius. Arius was a bishop in the diocese of Alexandria. He claimed that Jesus Christ was created by God. He also therefore claimed that there was a time when the Son of God did not exist. This caused quite a stir, and his local bishop asked him to recant his view. When Arius wouldn't recant, he was excommunicated. But Arius had strong connections and eventually the Pope and the bishops of the whole Church got involved. To settle this debate and other debates (like the date of Easter), Emperor Constantine called the Council of Nicea in 325, opening up an ongoing concern about the relationship between the Emperor and the Church.

Nicea was the first time the *global* Church engaged in focused debate and arrived at conclusive sets of beliefs called Doctrines. This council created the Creed we recite each Sunday, and set up the sequence of the major doctrinal struggles in the Church since that time.

- The first, we've already heard about, was the solidification of the Trinity: We believe in one God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
- The second was the clarification that Jesus is both God and man
- The third was the beginnings of clarification about actions of the Holy Spirit in the world
- And the fourth was the definition of the People of God, the Church.

These things might sound a bit esoteric to us, but they were very important at the time. For 300 years, these debates had to a large extent been bottled up due to Christian persecutions. Now they were free flowing. In one sense, keeping track of the different sides of the debate was kind of like tracking sports scores today. In another sense, as Christianity was becoming the religion of the empire, it was becoming the religion of power – people wanted to know what they needed to believe in order to belong. But in the greatest sense, it dealt with the central mystery of the Christian experience: what happened on the cross? Did God die? Truly? And why?

In 381, a second ecumenical council was called in Constantinople to further explore the Persons of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Constantinople reaffirmed the Nicene creed and added clarification. The Nicene creed had just said “We believe in the Holy Spirit.” But Constantinople added the words “The Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father. With the Father and Son, he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets.” They added “Lord” to assure the Church that the Holy Spirit was God. They had added “the Giver of Life” to insist that the Holy Spirit was present at and before creation. They added “who proceeds from the Father” to insist that the Holy Spirit does not come from the Son alone – it's not just Jesus' spirit. And they added “with the Father and Son he is worshipped and glorified” to reiterate that He is God.

Along with exploring the divinity of the Holy Spirit, Constantinople opened up a set of questions about the Divinity of Jesus. How could he be God and man at the same time? Really, aren't you one or the other? The mainline thinking was that Jesus was truly God and truly Human, but people didn't know how. Some said he had a human body with a Godly soul – sort of like a ghost in the machine. This was an effort to try to understand how God could take on human form, but this would mean that Jesus only redeemed the human body when he died on the cross, not our human souls, and thus didn't redeem us as whole persons. In response to this idea being shot down, some said he had a human body and soul, in other words he was materially like us, but not a human mind and human free will, in other words, it was impossible for him to act like us. They claimed that if Jesus had these qualities, he would have sinned too easily, just like we do, and one of the things we know about Jesus is that He did not sin. But again, this would have meant that Jesus didn't redeem us as whole persons. See, all this high falutin' talk about Jesus on the cross was really a discussion of who we are: are we spirit or body or both?

In the end, the Council of Chalcedon, in 451, affirmed the divinity of Christ, his oneness with the Father, and the mysterious hypostatic union of both complete divinity and complete humanity in the person of Jesus. And it also confirmed that Jesus lived in the material world, just like us. As a result, he confirmed that our material bodies are good.

The years after Chalcedon found the Christian world sidetracked by the encroachment of Islam on the crumbling Roman Empire. The Holy Lands and Northern Africa were conquered by Muslims and Constantinople was under attack. There was a split between the Roman Empire in Rome and that in Constantinople and over the years, both emperors tried to get together again and they leveraged the belief systems of people at the time, the faith of people to try to come up with ways to force that union to happen. In other words, political authority was used for maneuvering spiritual positions. In the end, the beliefs of Chalcedon held, but damage had been done to the relationship of the Church and the Emperors – the struggle of political and spiritual authorities had led to less than pristine uses of each. By 800, the Western Church allied itself not with the declining Empires of Rome and Constantinople but with the emerging empire of Charlemagne and the Franks, beginning the Holy Roman Empire. The seeds were sewn for schism between East and West and the Dark Ages had begun. By the way, do you know why they were called the dark ages? Because there were so many knights in them!

**St. Hildegard of Bingen** was born along the Rhine around 1100, the 10th child of parents in the upper nobility of Germany. She was tithed, and she was consecrated to God at her birth – a not uncommon practice for the believing parent at the time. Although I must say, it is an impressive gesture of the devotion of giving one tenth of all good gifts to God. But haven't most of us done something similar with our children, just not quite so formally? When she was 8, she was entrusted to the hermitage of Jutta, a boarding school where she learned to read and write. Throughout her life, she was gifted with powerful experiences of God. "From my infancy until now, when I am seventy years of age, my soul has beheld this Light; and in it my soul soars to the summit of the firmament and into a different air." Hildegard knew God. She also had extensive knowledge of a wide range of topics. She wrote numerous books on plants, medicines and emotional health. She was a forceful preacher, traveling hundreds of miles from her Abbey to preach against heresies. She was outspoken, reprimanding both popes and emperors. Hildegard understood how deeply God is intertwined with His creation here on earth. She spoke out for women, she healed those who were ill, she brought new life and meaning to the Liturgy, and she called all to be caretakers of God's sacred creation.

With the collapse of the Roman Empire, knowledge began to reside exclusively with monks and nuns in monasteries, which reminds me of a joke.

Brother John entered the "Monastery of Silence" and the Abbott said, "Brother, this is a silent monastery. You are welcome here as long as you wish, but you may not speak until I direct you to do so."

Brother John lived in the monastery for 5 years, copying texts, studying and writing new books, before the Abbott said to him: "Brother John, you have been here 5 years now. You may speak two words."

Brother John said, "Hard Bed."

"I'm sorry to hear that," the Abbott said. "We will get you a better bed."

After another 5 years of copying texts, studying and writing new books, Brother John was called by the Abbott. "

You may say another two words, Brother John."

"Cold Food," said Brother John, and the Abbott assured him that the food would be better in the future.

On his 15th anniversary at the monastery, the Abbott again called Brother John into his office. "Two words you may say today."

"I Quit," said Brother John.

"It is probably best," said the Abbott. "You've done nothing but complain since you got here."

Christian thinkers had worked out most of the issues of Jesus as God, and now the discussion shifted to how the Holy Spirit was God. In particular, they focused on the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, which could only occur after the redeeming work of God the Son. In other words, the question was around how God shared his grace or love with us in this world. Hildegard gave a good example of how God interacts with us through the goodness of His creation here on earth. In fact, the Christian sacraments had all along emphasized how simple, earthly symbols, became the vehicles by which God bestows His grace on His people.

The key debate of this period focused in on how Christ was present with us through the Eucharist. Certainly he was truly present, nobody debated that, but did that mean that we were eating real human flesh and drinking real human blood? The gist of the debate was caused by attempts to put into words what is ultimately a mystery – isn't that what all these debates have been about? Trinity: mystery. Jesus as God and man: mystery. And now, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist: mystery. Mystery is the reason we have faith. But our Western mind struggles against mystery like a caged animal.

The debate began because the language and thought structures of the time were insufficient to address the mystery. We still have that problem today because people mean different things when they use the same words.

When a woman uses the word “vulnerable” she would say that it's fully opening up one's self emotionally to another. A man would say it's playing football without a helmet.

When a woman uses the word “communication” she would say it's the open sharing of thoughts and feelings with one's partner. A man would say it's scratching out a note before suddenly taking off for a weekend with the boys.

When a woman uses the word “taste” she would say it's something you do frequently to whatever you're cooking, to make sure it's good. A man would say it's something you must do to anything you think has gone bad, prior to tossing it out.

When defining things of the faith, the Church needed to find words that weren't open to interpretation. Fortunately, it was about this time that the Church was introduced to a new, or rather, old, system of thought, that of Aristotle, and found a precisely defined way of speaking that allowed us to differentiate between the substance of a thing and the appearance, or accident, of a thing.

This rediscovery of classical thought was brought about by the very Muslims who were vanquishing the Roman Empire – their love of science and ancient philosophy meant that they had ready copies of Aristotle to share. In the schools, a revolution in thought followed, called the Scholastic movement, which began to describe in philosophical terms all those things that were unable to be definitively described in the 1000 previous years.

Entire systems of thought were laid out by great thinkers like Thomas Aquinas which attempted to describe the mystery of God's grace in the sacraments and in the actions of the Church and her people. These systems of thought appealed to the Western mind because they came up with clear and logical explanations of almost everything and removed much of the mystery of our faith and the misunderstanding between definitions of words.

At the same time that this revolution in defining the elements of our faith was taking place in the schools, in the halls of power the impact of the Church on society was increasing. Less and less could one discern between political and spiritual leadership. Church officials were appointed by political leaders. And political leaders were anointed by Church officials. Many of us long for a world where the values of Christianity are embedded in our society and law. But since that society and that law are formulated and enforced by human beings, temptations can sometimes get in their way. As the adage goes: "Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely."

In general, the vast majority of Christian leaders at the time attempted to sincerely live from the core of their faith. But there were enough insincere leaders in powerful enough positions to cause notoriety.

In response to abuses of power, there were a number of movements in Europe in which sincere people attempted to live out their beliefs austerely. However, with the infusion of new ideas brought back by the Crusades, these beliefs were sometimes founded on heretical thoughts similar to those that had plagued the early church – that the body is evil and must be negated. A group of people, called the Cathars, said that in order to be saved, you must abandon the material world. Which reminds me of a joke.

The Cathars walked barefoot everywhere, to the point that their feet became quite thick and hard. They also were deeply spiritual people. They did not eat much and became quite thin and frail. And unfortunately, due to their diet, they had bad breath... They came to be known as a super-calloused fragile mystics plagued with halitosis."

But seriously, it was hard to criticize these people: they lived simply and purely, and their numbers grew steadily. It was only the reasons for their simplicity and purity that were unacceptable: they rejected the created world as evil. As Hildegard reminds us, we know that when God created this world and man and woman, that he called each thing "good." To combat these movements, equally simple and pure Catholic preachers, such as the Dominicans and Franciscans, helped to point to the Truth. Yet, many refused to listen. Some dark days of the Church ensued in dealing with these people. An actual Crusade was launched in southern France against them. On top of that, the Inquisition was instituted to deal with them. Both were overly reactionary and severe responses, but we need to understand them in the culture of the time, like the "ban" in the Old Testament, which didn't see things with our perspective or hindsight.

During the 13 and 1400s, the desire by some Church/political leaders for a comfortable life and control led to aberrations from the central Gospel message and an intertwining of spiritual and earthly rule. The crisis reached a height around 1400 when there were actually 3 different claimants to the papacy. So while the structures of thought in the schools was building up, the structures of action in offices of power was breaking down. Increasingly many members of the Church distrusted the hierarchical Church and respected the authority of local preachers like the Dominicans and Franciscans who practiced what they preached. On top of this was a general politically-based distrust of a distant ruler, the Pope, over the activities of a local community. The Church as an organizing structure was losing its way in the world despite the efforts of upright women and men to redirect it.

Let me tell you a joke:

The Pope dies and goes to heaven. When he gets there, Saint Peter shows him to his new quarters which turn out to be a tiny one bedroom apartment.

The Pope is horrified and wants to know why he doesn't have the penthouse apartment, which is huge.

Saint Peter informs him that the resident of the penthouse is a lawyer.

"A lawyer," says the Pope. "But I'm the Pope, surely I'm more important."

"With respect Sir," says Saint Peter, "We have lots of Pope's up here, but we only have ONE lawyer!"

Let me tell you about that one lawyer, **Thomas More**. Born in 1478 of highly respected citizens, Thomas More was sent to top schools in England and excelled in the Law. His marriage to Jane Colt produced 4 children, and unlike most men of his day, Thomas took great interest in their upbringing, education and faith. They read the Bible every night and discussed it. He went to mass every day. He invited the poor to his house for dinner. And his servants were treated as equals. So impressive were his skills at work that Henry VIII made him the first lay Lord Chancellor of England (the head of the judicial part of the government). He often challenged and chastened Henry, but he was so well liked and did so in such a goodhearted and gentle way, that Henry could do little about it. It was not until Henry divorced Catherine of Aragon and married Ann Bolyn that the conflict came to a *head*, get it? Ann Bolyn. Came to a head. You see, the Catholic Church refused to recognize the marriage, seeing no reason why the first marriage was not valid. Henry broke off with the Church and required all those in power to recognize him as Protector and Supreme Head of the Church of England. Rather than deny his Church, Thomas resigned his post. Henry was incensed and demanded that all his subjects recognize his marriage to Ann. Thomas again refused, choosing imprisonment. For the same reason, his friend, John Fisher, the Bishop of Rochester, was also imprisoned and executed. By the way, a funny story about St. John Fisher: a half hour before his execution, John opened his New Testament for the last time and his eyes fell on the following words: "Eternal life is this: to know You, the only true God, and Him Whom You have sent, Jesus Christ." Closing the book, he dryly and wittily observed: "There is enough learning in that to last me the rest of my life."

Anyway, nine days after St. John Fisher's execution, Thomas More was tried and convicted of treason. As he walked up the scaffold where he was to be beheaded, a joker until the end, he tripped and asked his handler for help, saying "Please give me a hand now, as for my coming back down, let me shift for myself." I guess that's where the term "gallows humor" comes from. He was beheaded, like his friend, for standing up for his faith, regardless of what his society, his king and his peers urgently prodded him to believe otherwise.

Against the abuses and intermingling of political and spiritual leadership, a number of people began to recommend radical remedies to the problems of their society. Beginning with John Wycliff in England, and John Hus in Bohemia, an increasingly strong movement began to be primed, so that when in 1517, Martin Luther reacted against abuses in the Church, many people were ready both spiritually and politically to take over control of what seemed to be a failing institution.

Luther spoke to a pent up feeling amongst Europeans. Soon others took his lead and proclaimed further splits with the Church. In an attempt to remove the cancer of corruption due to some people in the Church, they recommended radical surgery, which, depending on one's point of view, removed vital and healthy tissue that had nothing to do with the disease.

- To remedy the unhealthy intermingling of political and spiritual power, they denied the authority of the Pope completely, both politically and spiritually.
- To remedy the unhealthy practices of some members of the Church who used the belief system for personal gain, they rejected the authority of Tradition, instead declaring the Scriptures as the sole conveyors of revealed truth.
- As a result of removing the guidance and governance of any spiritual authority, and as a result of removing any authoritative revelation from God but the Scripture, they declared that no one but the individual believer can authoritatively interpret that scripture.
- With a focus on the individual and without tradition, or a community of central belief, they questioned some or all of the sacraments, the communal interaction between God and man.
- And they saw humankind and our material world in such poor light, that without faith as a gift wholly given by God, we are unable to do good.

In the end, the goals of the reformation were noble. It was the means of that reformation, completely splitting with the Church and throwing away Tradition, that were less helpful. But perhaps it was only by such severe treatment and such fervent support, that the Church finally woke up.

You see, in the mid-1500s, the Church responded with fervor to these challenges at the Council of Trent. It used the language of Aquinas to defend the Church against the challenges of the Protestant reformers. This language focused on philosophical terms, details, and Scriptural proofs in order to create a bulwark against the critiques of the reformers. In fact, Trent did such an admirable job of reforming, defining and defending our faith that when most of us look to define our belief, we look to the concrete, seemingly sure and absolute language of Trent. Many of us don't look beyond Trent to the insights and language of earlier councils. And some of us are not completely comfortable with insights of later councils like Vatican II due to its use of less precise and more poetic language than Trent. We'll talk in more detail about some of the insights of Trent in our talks on the Sacraments, Church and Grace.

### **St. Martin de Porres**

The new world was explored and claimed by a number of countries, among them Spain. A Spanish knight wed a freed African slave in modern day Peru, bringing about two children, but he soon left the family. Martin de Porres, his sister and his mother lived amidst prejudice and hatred against them as non-Europeans. It's been said that the violence which pervades the United States is part of a still distrustful and fearful racism which infests all of our souls. So listen to this attempt to make do in a racist world. His mother's goal for him, which combined her love and her hard-earned understanding of this life, was to teach him a simple skill that he could survive with – a simple, practical goal. Isn't this similar to what so many of our poor brothers and sisters desire for their children and even themselves. At the age of 12, Martin became a barber. But Martin's mother also taught him to love the Lord, and later Martin chose to enter the Dominican order – a black face wearing a white habit. When slave ships would arrive from Africa, Martin would greet the emaciated slaves, care for them and encourage them. Prejudice ran high when people saw him doing so, and he faced hardships from the populace as he continued his ministry. He focused his further efforts on the poor of Peru, especially the black and Indian populations because he knew it was wrong for society to treat any group of people differently from others – and these were being treated differently. His fellow Dominicans remarked how incredibly busy Martin was: caring for the slaves on the ships, the poor in the streets, yet attending prayer with the community every 3 hours. How different was his hectic life from ours? He had obligations, competing pressures – but Martin de Porres also had focus and priorities. Despite the differences in time, skin color, and vocation, Martin, you show us that our focus needs to be on God's people and their needs, not our own.

One of the great things about the Protestant Reformation is that it caused the Church to refocus itself on its mission on earth, namely, to become the body of Christ. As the world view of the Church shifted from seeing Europe as the entire world, to discovery of the entire globe, the Church began to recognize a set of obligations and responsibilities: to bring people to God, to save their souls, and at the same time, to encourage the Kingdom of God by treating them justly. It has been said, if you want peace, work for justice. That's a hard pill for us affluent suburban Americans to swallow, but it has a certain amount of truth to it.

With the discovery of the vast resources of the "new world", a revolution in manufacturing and science took off. The Industrial Revolution changed the shape of society from predominantly rural and agrarian, to predominantly urban and mercantile creating a whole set of problems that never existed before. In 1891 the pope wrote a proclamation on social justice called *Rerum Novarum*, "Concerning New Things", and popes have continued to write a new one every 10 years since. This lasting trend has increased to the point that in many regions of the world, including the United States, the national conference of bishops has further expressed the role of Catholic Christians in society. Increasingly and with every repetition of the basic tenets of Catholic social teaching, these statements are forming into doctrine. Catholicism has urged a middle line between the complete abrogation of freedom in Communist society, and the complete unfettering of freedom in Capitalistic society. The obligation of the individual and society to actively and substantially share riches and care for the entire human people, just like the first Christians did, is a drumbeat which will become louder in the decades to come.

**St. Elizabeth Ann Seton** was a devout member of the Trinity Episcopal Church in New York, Elizabeth Ann Bayley married Richard Seton in 1795. They had 5 children in the first 8 years of their marriage – an upper middle class family in the traditional Episcopal faith, in a well to do neighborhood in New York. But after 8 years, Richard's business and health failed, forcing the family to move to Italy for a better climate. Unfortunately, their reception there was less than warm. Fearing that he might have brought Yellow Fever with him, they confined them in quarantine. Richard's health worsened, but Elizabeth steadfastly cared for him, comforting him, cleaning up the blood which he coughed up, keeping his spirits strong. For a month she ran what was essentially a hospice for him and took care of the children. For a month, until he died. My mother did something similar for my father as he was dying from cancer. I suspect we know someone who's done the same thing – trying to live their life while caring about nothing else than the life of another ebbing away before them.

Alone in a foreign country with no husband, Elizabeth would have been lost save but the kindness of the Filicchi family, who took them in and allowed the Setons to live with them. During that year, the faith of the Filicchis impressed Elizabeth and her children. Each day, mass was celebrated. Twice daily, prayers were said, the entire household participating, servants and even the Episcopal Seton family. After a year, Elizabeth was ready to return home and on the long ship ride, she read a number of books about Catholicism. When she returned to New York, she opened a school and later converted to Catholicism. The initial support she received from her home community dried up upon her conversion and she was forced to move to Baltimore and open a new school there. I know of many converts whose families have shunned them. What a strong statement of faith for those converts to continue on.

She put her sons in a boarding school and took her daughters with her, and began a new religious order, the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity. So successful were her efforts that soon she had congregations in Emmitsburg, Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York. Her oldest daughter, Anna, became a novice but became seriously sick and died before her 18th birthday. Her second daughter, Elizabeth, died several years later. And her youngest daughter, Rebecca, died in her arms after suffering greatly from a tumor. I can't imagine how difficult it must be to see your children die, let alone to cradle their lifeless body in your arms and weep deeply, sob mournfully, cry forlornly for what they meant to you and what they could have been. I can imagine the tirades at God, the pleas for sense in a senseless, capricious world. Who knows the toll it took, for she herself died at the young age of 47, having encountered more suffering in her few years on earth than most. Maybe because of or maybe in spite of her challenges, she not only suffered more than most of us, but she far outperformed most of us in terms of the impact she made on this world. Were it not for her efforts, her enduring legacy, and her community, Catholic schools would never have become what they are in the United States. Is there a similar challenge God has for us, if only we'd get off our self directed track of life, and get onto His?

You, see, that's really what our Church Tradition wants to help us with: getting off our self directed track of life and on to God's. To put all this rich Tradition and prescient thinking into perspective, it might be helpful to think about Thomas Aquinas. Thomas Aquinas is recognized as the foremost Doctor of the Church. His way of explaining the things of God and our Church became the basis for the definitions of Trent and our modern day. He wrote a monumental treatise on the faith called the *Summa Theologica*, or the summation of theology. At the age of 49, he had a vision of God's everlasting love, and stopped writing. Urged by his companions to complete the *Summa Theologica*, he replied: "I can do no more; such things have been revealed to me that all I have written seems as straw." And he wrote no more in light of his understanding of the central experience of God: His Love.

Jesus, was also asked to sum up all theology and truth, and he did so in a more succinct manner than Aquinas: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself."

The goal of the Church is to gather in all of God's people, and to guide them to the Truth. That Truth is documented in her Traditions and in the Scriptures. And the goal of these two sources of revelation is to help us *experience* the Word of God.

Our Tradition is a rich tapestry of the powerful revelation of God to people across the ages.

- There are teachings which have awed me in their ability to bring together all my questions and put all my doubts to rest.
- There are teachings which have served as a staircase which allowed me to gain a much more profound view of God and myself.
- There are teachings that have made break down and cry due to their beauty and comfort in times of distress.
- There are teachings which have inspired me to see my world and God's people with all the splendor that they deserve and caused me to change my behavior toward them.

But we must never forget that all the rich and beautiful truths we encounter in Scripture and Tradition simply document and lead us to the one central experience of people across generations and communities, the one truth above all truths: God's eternal love for us.